Mr. Lecter

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Mr. Lecter

by CReed

Summary

Will Graham used to be a lot of things. Will Graham used to be a teacher. Friend. Colleague. Special agent. He wasn't the best man he knew, but he tried his best with what he had. And now, after helping someone close to him, Will finds himself in a situation he can't get out of, in a web of lies that threatens to strangle him the more he struggles. A case of mistaken identity that Will can't correct. Too many people have died, and will continue to die, if he does. He was Will Graham, but he doesn't know if he'll lose himself entirely when all is said and done.

Chapter One

Chapter Notes

> For some reason, I have a weird urge, a mighty need, to write a Mrs. Winterbourne ala Hannibal story. I can't explain nor defend this idea, other than I thought it up and now it won't leave me alone. I'm keeping tags to a minimum because I don't want to give too much away. It's proving to be really fun to write. So I hope everyone who gives this story a chance enjoys it. Again, no excuses. I am fully aware how completely self-indulgent this is. It's just for fun...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mister Lecter
Act One:

The Switch

Chapter One

It was nighttime. Technically. In a city like Bucharest, night was only measured by the darkening of the sky. And even then, the sky was always in a hazy kind of twilight. Never completely dark with all the lights. Bucharest never settled down. Nightlife was just that. Lively and boisterous and loud. Will bought a sleep machine as soon as he could when he first arrived. Now, there was almost something pleasant in hearing cars and voices and music all around him. A jungle of people and concrete.

Will Graham smiled at the thought as he stirred the pot on his little stove in his little apartment. He must be tired if he was getting poetic about a noisy city. Looking at the clock he sighed. It was getting rather late. Honestly, he shouldn't be eating so far past his usual dinner time but if he didn't, he foresaw mucking up tomorrow as well. The day had been hectic: his classes were pushed back by two hours as a large accident held up traffic in the city. Tests still had to be administered, though. That took another two hours. Papers that were waited on had to be graded. Errands needed running. Then there came the realization that groceries had to be bought.

A late day, a late night.

He spooned a few helpings onto a plate, grabbing at a fork from a drawer, before sitting at the small table tucked into the corner of the kitchen. The glass of whiskey he poured earlier already half-empty. He took a sip before digging into the steaming dish. Just simple butter noodles with a few slices of chicken from the fridge thrown in. Will could admit he became a dirty little carb monster when he was tired and frazzled. No one was around to lecture him on the importance of eating his growing foods. The beauty of the bachelor's life, he supposed.

He ate as he read over some reports from his students that he didn't get to during the day. The urge to roll his eyes was strong. Lazy work was universal, from America to Romania. The thought was oddly comforting.

A few bites in and one paper down, his phone rang. Will tossed his glasses to the remaining stack of homework while tapping to accept the call. “Hello?”

“Will.” The hushed, panicked voice crackling in his ear sent him standing. There was only one reason she would call.

“Margot. Are you injured?”

“No. I'm fine but he's found me. He knows.”

“Have you seen him?”

“No, but I'm being followed. I have been for two days. I thought I was just being paranoid. I wanted to make sure.”

Will kept from yelling at her. It wouldn't help either of them. Nothing productive would come from telling her what a stupid mistake that was. There was no point in reminding her that if she had any suspicions, no matter how trivial they seemed, she was supposed to drop everything and run. He stopped himself from saying things that cut because he had never heard her sound so scared. They were countries apart. Margot needed to stay calm.

“Are you at your house?”

“Yes. He has to know. They have to have told him. I'm too far along to hide it. They'll have told him and now he knows. He knows where I am. And now Mason knows about the baby, Will. He knows about my baby.”

Will tried to soothe her over the phone. “We planned for this, remember? Margot, tell me the plan.” He talked her through the steps as he went through the house, shutting off all the lights, closing the blinds that might have been opened. His go-bag was in the closet by the front entrance. Will knelt to check the contents one final time.

Margot's breath was shaking but she said with a steady voice, “Take what I have already packed, make sure I have my money and papers. My gun is cleaned and loaded. I've got my ticket for—”

“I don't need to know,” he interrupted her itinerary. “Good. You're doing great. You need to leave as soon as you can, and make sure they're not following you now.”

“What about you?” There were tears in her voice. He had never known Margot to cry.

“I'm doing the same thing. Everything is ready, just as we prepared. We'll contact each other when we've both reached our next destination. Do you remember the way we'll get in touch?” He zipped the bag. A few changes of clothes. Passports. Papers. His extra identities. Three spare phones. A tablet. Most of the money he had. He checked his gun before slipping it into the waistline of his jeans.

“Yes.”

“All right. You need to leave now. Destroy your phone and sim card once you hang up. Good luck, Margot.”

“Goodbye, Will.”

The call ended and Will popped the back off the phone before cracking the small chip inside in two. He crushed the phone beneath the heel of his boot. It went into the trash along with the rest of his dinner. He was out and on the landing of the apartment in ten minutes since he first heard Margot's voice. Blending into the crowds was easy. Bucharest never slept. That was one of the reasons why he chose the city in the first place.

He hadn't minded laying low in Romania. It was a beautiful country. The people weren't overly curious, either. It made not being noticed easier. The life he led as a dowdy teacher at one of the small colleges had been interesting. But he wasn't sorry to be leaving.

The night was still bustling along. It worked in his favor. No one could pick him out amongst the throng of partiers, workers and tourists. The crowds protected him all the way to the train station. The woman at the window didn't make small talk or bat an eyelash at his late departure, stamping the ticket purchased for a one-way trip to Lithuania under the name Aiden Teague.

All he had to do now was wait. He took out his tablet to email his boss and co-workers. Due to an unforeseen family emergency, he would have to leave his teaching post behind. For good. So sorry for the inconvenience. His syllabus was attached. No contact information aside from the email address. It was a dick move but necessary. Out of curiosity, he checked his bank account. He smiled as red-font warnings popped up on the page. His bank account suspended and frozen until further notice. Under suspicion of theft and fraud, all assets were locked. Good thing he only ever kept the minimum amount needed in there to have his account remain open. Keeping some sort of online trail let him know how close he was to being found.

Mason was thorough, but he was still an idiot. Friends in law enforcement to help do his dirty work, but a moron just the same. The bank was located in another city. Even if Mason narrowed down the search to Romania, Will was as prepared as he could be. The ticket was purchased weeks ago with cash. For a train. Mason would be looking for boats and planes.

He shut everything down and put his one bag to rights. Unfortunately, security was tight. It wasn't surprising. He prepared for that too. Still, it was a shame what he had to do. With hesitance borne from an experienced paranoia and, well, being American, he sadly wiped down his gun and tossed it in the trash can in the bathroom when he went to take a piss before his departure. He hated not having that kind of protection but it got him safely to the station and that's the best he could do.
There came an announcement in Romanian, Polish, Lithuanian, Belarusian, Russian and finally English. The train for Vilnius would be leaving soon. Please locate your luggage and make your way to the appropriate gate. Have a nice journey.

Will pulled himself to his feet, slinging his bag over his shoulder. This was a lull in the excitement. His adrenaline was fading, leaving him to crash at the reality of the situation. After almost half a year of calm and quiet, he was once more on the run. Tired. Hungry. He sighed, ignoring the life he was abandoning, as he showed his ticket and bag to the waiting attendant. It didn't matter what he left or what he was heading towards. Survival was the most important thing.

The ticket and bag passed inspection. He was ushered by with a smile. No one cared. Just another traveler. No one was looking for him this way yet. With a yawn he plopped down into his designated seat. Ordering a drink of their strongest stuff was tempting but Will refrained. He wasn't out of the woods. Letting his guard down for a second could mean death.

Just a few more months and it would be over. He wanted it all to be over. A chant began an endless loop in his mind as he settled for the trip. Three and a half months. Just three and a half months left. Then Margot would have her baby. A Verger baby. Their baby. The heir to one of the most affluent and shady families in the United States. And then Margot would be safe. The baby would be safe. And Will could go home. After he killed Mason. Because Margot's brother would never stop on his own. There was only one way to stop him. Will just had to wait, hide and keep Margot hidden, until her baby was born.

No sleep would be lost over killing Mason. The man was a pig and he deserved everything that Will had planned for him over the past few months.

But first: onto Lithuania and three and a half more months of living a lie.

Will ignored the bustling around him. For a late-night ride, there were lots of people on the train. He let the noise around him fade away as he opened his book and began to read. The only book he brought with him. His copy of *The Divine Comedy*. Tattered and dog-eared and scribbled upon. He couldn't say how many times he had read it. It never grew old. There was always something new he found within its pages to discover and contemplate.

He was reading through *Purgatorio* when he became aware of someone watching him. A shadow over his knee and the floor. He looked up to find a beautiful woman standing at the edge of the aisle by his seat. She smiled and asked, probably for the third or more time, if it was all right if they took the seats around him. “They” being the woman, a man standing protectively behind her and the infant he rocked gently against his broad shoulder.

Will understood her Romanian but answered in English anyway. “Of course.”

He stood to make room for them as they passed to the side. Who he guessed was her husband let her take the window seat. They made themselves comfortable across from him. The man put their luggage away without a word after handing the baby over to the woman.

“You're American,” She asked, smiling after she put away her purse and set the baby's bag on the empty seat next to Will. She quickly tucked her bright red hair behind her ear in case the baby decided to make a grab for the shiny strands.

“Yes, ma'am, I am.” When in doubt, he always fell back on his Southern manners. For some reason it always seemed to charm people and make up for his awkwardness.

“I'm Gabi. This is Nigel.” She nodded as her hands were full, but Nigel took his hand in a firm shake.

“Aiden. Nice to meet you.”

There came a soft, snuffling sound and Gabi looked down to watch the baby yawn. Small pink hands curled with the effort. “And this is Katinka.”

Will inclined his head towards the baby. She was tiny. Couldn't be more than two months old, if that. “Nice to meet you too, Katinka.”

“Are you stationed here, Aiden?” It was the first time Nigel spoke. His accent was different from Gabi's, a lilt in places that was absent from hers.

“You mean the army base? No, I'm not enlisted.”

“You don't seem antsy like the common American tourist, is all.”

“Nigel, don't be mean,” Gabi admonished with a playful glare at her husband.

Nigel smiled at her and the action transformed his face. He was a handsome man, to be sure, but the expression softened him. Made him look not so dangerous. “I'm only saying, Aiden here is not the usual jittery tourist that gets their wallet stolen minutes after wandering away from the airport.” He winked at Gabi, taking up her hand for a quick kiss.

Will laughed and nodded. “Fair point. No, I'm not in the army, or a tourist. I'm a professor at one of the small colleges in Bucharest. Psychology,” he added before they ventured to ask.

“That sounds exciting,” Gabi said as she switched Katinka over to rest against her other arm.

“I was just going to say how terribly dull that sounded.” As if to emphasize his point, Nigel's voice was a tired drawl.

Will couldn't help smiling, meeting Nigel's amused stare. This man was rude but so damn charming he could probably get away with murder in the street. He took in the couple. Gabi had a Bohemian Punk kind of style. Flowing blouses with tight jeans and big black boots. Flaming red hair that tickled her jawline. Kohl lined her pale eyes. Will couldn't decide if they were blue or green. Nigel was much more posh. Flashy. His slacks were fitted, tailored. If Will had to guess, Nigel’s white button-up shirt was silk. However, his thick biceps that stretched his short sleeves told Will he wasn't a stranger to physical work. Black, Italian leather shoes. Ash-blonde hair long enough to be held back from his striking hazel eyes by what looked to be five hundred-dollar sunglasses.

“And what is it that you two do?”

“Gabi's a cellist for the orchestra.”

“Was.” Gabi's smile was forced for a moment before something genuine took its place as she traced a finger along her sleeping daughter's cheek. “I'm, how do you say...I'm having maternal time away.”

“She's an angel on the strings. I bet they're fucking dying while you've been gone. Did you ever go to the symphony, Aiden?”

“Once or twice.” Work-related. He hated every moment of the socializing aspect of it, but the music had been great.

“Well, then you might've heard our Gabi. Small world.”

“It is, indeed. What do you do, Nigel?”

“I'm a businessman. I own several nightclubs throughout the city. I lease out venues for performances, as well. Sometimes, Gabi and I cross paths professionally.”

“Now I know why I sound boring to you.”

That dry statement earned Will a surprised, genuine laugh from the man. When Nigel shifted in his seat, Will could make out a tattoo on his neck. Dark ink against tanned skin. It looked like a woman. Burlesque. Interesting. Gabi hushed Nigel, smiling at Will as she put her hand on her husband's knee.

“He's teasing. Don't take what he says serious, Aiden.”

Will smiled and shrugged. He was tired and Nigel seemed to see a lot as he watched him with an ever-amused stare, but he was nowhere near being offended. Something told him Nigel could go for the throat if he wanted, metaphorically or literally. There was no need for an incident. They were good company. Will could handle a light barb or two. Nigel signaled for an attendant and ordered them all a drink. Whiskey for them and a glass of red wine for Gabi. When Nigel insisted he pay for Will, he clinked their glasses together in thanks. Perhaps Nigel was warming to him after all.

“You live and work in Romania, but are going to Lithuania. Is it for your job you travel so far?” Gabi sipped her wine, rocking Katinka in her travel bassinet.

“No. I had some vacation time I needed to use. A quick getaway seemed like a good idea.”

Nigel snorted and swallowed a good portion of his whiskey. “You chose fucking Lithuania for your vacation? Anyone ever tell you, you have an odd sense of taste, Aiden?”

“Actually, yes. Not those exact words, though.”

“I bet.” Nigel was still snickering about his vacation choice.

Will motioned between the couple with his glass. “I'm guessing you're traveling to Lithuania not because of a 'want' but for a 'need.'”

“We are going to see Nigel's family.” Gabi's smile didn't quite reach her eyes. She took another gulp of wine.

“First time?”

“Yes. Even when we were dating, and then married, we never seemed to have the time to have them visit, or go to them.” Gabi gave a little shake in her seat, giggling in exasperation at herself. “I am very nervous.”

Nigel was already shaking his head, turning to tug gently at one of Gabi's ruby locks. “There's no need to feel nervous, none. My family are a bunch of stuffy assholes. You don't need to impress anybody, darling.”

“They are your family. It is important.”

“They're fucking mental. Don't stress over them.” Without breaking eye contact with Gabi or stopping stroking her hair, Nigel signaled at Will with his free hand. His silver bracelet caught the light, a pattern that reminded Will of antlers carved across the surface. “We should bring our new frumpy little American with us. He's a psychologist. Maybe he can do something about them.”

Will laughed, shaking his head. “I'm not a practicing psychologist. My background is actually in forensic psychology and behavioral science.”

They both turned to look at him, Nigel frowning. “I don't know what any of what you just said means.” He stood and took their glasses. The journey just began. They were going to need more alcohol.

* * * * *

It was hard sleeping on a moving train. Will never intended on retiring to one of the cramped cabins. He already broke his rule about drinking. Going to sleep while in the process of running was out of the question. He caught a few naps here and there, sweater bunched under his head for a pillow. Honestly, between the ordeal that set his tumultuous evening into motion and the company he found himself in, sleep was far from his mind. He was simply too wired to relax.

Gabi and Nigel never left for a cabin, either. Nigel muttered something about not wanting to bother lugging their things back and forth. Gabi didn't want to risk disturbing Katinka. She was quiet. For a newborn. Will hardly heard a peep out of her. She only started to fuss fourteen hours into the trip. All she needed was food and a changing. And so it went, almost like clockwork. Every few hours Katinka let everyone know when she was hungry or needed a new diaper. The rest of the time she slept.

Thirty-five hours into the trip and Will got up with more in mind than a bathroom break. He needed to move. Get some air. He left as quietly as he could for the next car back. It had a screened-in area where passengers could sit and enjoy the passing scenery. The car was empty. At first Will thought it might be due to the fact that it was once again very late. Nearly morning. But then a cool draft of wind blew in from the windows and lightning lit up the dark car. He was glad he thought to grab his sweater. Frumpy or not. Nigel was a jackass.

He had only been leaning against the sill, watching sheets of rain slash by, for maybe five minutes when voices drifted to him over the sound of the train's wheels. A friendly squabble only parents could have.

“I've had her this whole time, Nigel. Take her for thirty minutes, at least. I want to go to the bathroom, maybe even freshen up without having to stop and worry that Katinka is falling off a couch or being smothered by a coat or something.”

“I will gladly look after our lovely bundle of joy, oh, moon of my delight. Take all the time you need.”

“Okay. I'm going then. If she cries, her bottle is in the front part of the bag. Nappies are in the back. But if she gets worse, come get me.”

“That won't be necessary, darling. I fucking got this, don't I, pretty girl? We're gonna let mama unwind a bit.”

There was some shuffling around and then Nigel was walking through the doorway, lightly bouncing a drowsy baby. He came to lean beside Will, keeping Katinka facing away from the screen. Nigel took in the dark clouds and pouring rain. In the distance there came a long rumble of thunder.

“Christ. I don't know why I expected anything different. A few hours into Lithuania and it's fucking miserable out there. As always. I hope you enjoyed the weather in Bucharest, because there's probably going to be fucking snow by the time we get to Vilnius.”

Will couldn't help smiling at the glare Nigel was giving the weather. “Not a fan of your homeland, I take it.”

“No. I put a lot of work and distance between me and this fucking country. I haven't been back in almost thirty years. Should be interesting, if nothing else.”

“And you're going back just because of your baby?” It didn't seem worth it if it bothered him so much.

Nigel shrugged. “My beautiful Gabriela thinks it'll be good for us, for Katinka. Maybe it will. We'll see. Do you have any kids, Aiden? Wife? Girlfriend? Boyfriend? A guy who wears argyle can't be single.”

“Shut up. No. No girl or boy in my life.” Will laughed, a strange flutter in his stomach whenever he remembered. “I do have a kid. On the way, anyway. The mom and I aren't together. She's not even in the same country.”

“Knock up an ex?”

“It wasn't like that. My friend prefers women, but she wanted a baby. She wanted a baby with me, actually. So I said yes. She bought us some insanely expensive whiskey. We finished the bottle. Afterwards, she was pregnant.” It was a very, *very* simplified version of events.

“No shit?”

“No shit.”

“Huh.” Nigel was silent for a moment, seeming to enjoy the fresh air. He took a deep breath and released it in a hiss. “I have a favor to ask.”

“Oh?”

“Could you hold Katinka while I smoke a quick cig, or five? Don't raise your eyebrow at me. Please, Aiden. I'm begging. It's been thirty-five hours since my last one and I'm at the end of my fucking rope. Gabi'll rip my balls off if she sees me out here with Katinka in one hand and a smoke in the other.”

“That *would* be a tragedy,” Will said, reaching for the baby. She was a lot lighter than he expected. It felt like she'd just float away if he took his hands from her. Katinka whimpered for a moment as he and Nigel situated her but fell silent as her head laid against his shoulder. Her tiny fingers wrapped themselves in his sweater. And then she fell asleep.

“You're doing me a fucking solid. Thank you.” A cigarette was already dangling from his lips. There came the flash from a lighter. Nigel groaned as he exhaled, keeping the waft of smoke towards the windows. He sighed, much calmer than he was earlier. “At least I know Gabi and my brother'll get along great. The fucker hated whenever I smoked too. She didn't always hate it. Gave it up when she knew we were pregnant. Gave up a few habits for the baby.”

It seemed like a sensitive subject, something deeper than a nicotine habit. Will didn't want to open a fresh wound. Instead, he steered their conversation to safer subjects. “You have a brother?”

“Brother and sister both. I left them behind with all the other bullshit in this country. They probably still live with my uncle at his fucking depressing house. Neither of them ever seemed willing to cut the cord and leave the nest.” Nigel smiled at Will's easy silence, flicking his cigarette out the window and lighting another. “You don't seem like a bleeding heart, worrying over my tragic family ties.”

Will shrugged, rubbing Katinka's back in gentle circles as he moved from the window to lean against the back of a couch. The dimmed lights flickered as the storm carried on outside. “Family is what we make of it. And sometimes, the people we are born knowing aren't worth keeping around. And those who are, are worth doing anything to keep.”

“Sounds like you're very familiar with the concept.”

“I am, so who am I to question or judge?” His hand drifted to cup the back of Katinka's head, fingers threading through fine strands of hair. Soft as spider silk. “And if you're now leaving more bullshit behind in Romania, I'd say sometimes it helps to go back to the roots to chop away the spreading problems.” Will smiled, a slow and easy thing, as Nigel gave him an assessing look. “I left a fair amount of bullshit, myself, behind in the states. And sooner rather than later, I am going to go back and chop away my own problematic roots.”

Nigel's laugh was a quiet rasp. Smoke curled from his lips. He flicked his cashed filter out the window. “I had a feeling you would understand.”

It was always a peculiar sensation when Will realized he was in a room with someone as observant as he was. Not often did he find someone fluent in the unspoken language of perception. Just as Will had Nigel and Gabi figured out, he had a feeling Nigel made his own deductions. They both smiled, amused that they were sizing one another up. A friendly sort of suspicion. Like sensing like.

Nigel took a step closer, mouth opening to say something but stopped his approach when there came a rumbling beneath them. The car shook, causing them both to stumble. All the lights flickered and died. Their faces illuminated by flashes of lightning. A shrill, wailing sound of twisting metal stabbed at his eardrums. Will instinctively cradled Katinka closer to his chest. Nigel's wide eyes met his. They had a split second to react.

Nigel tackled Will to the floor, caging him and Katinka within a tight hold against the rough carpet. A deafening bang. Will couldn't tell if his breath was knocked from him because of Nigel or the sudden violent jostle from all around. They were thrown about the room. Knocked against the floor that suddenly became the wall that turned into the floor once more. His forehead hit something sharp. There was no pain but his vision blurred and shifted. He never lost his grip on Katinka.

It didn't feel like he blacked out but Will knew he had lost time. He couldn't tell if his vision was blurry. It was too dark to see much of anything. Thunder echoed around him. Rain splattered against groaning metal. There came a smell of smoke and burnt hair. The numb tingling all over his body faded away to reveal he hurt everywhere. Rushes of freezing hot pain from head to toe. He was wracked with tremors. Only he slowly begun to realize it wasn't his body that was shaking but the one above him.

Nigel was shuddering, a clicking in his throat as if he was trying to speak. Will could barely make him out in the dark. He yelped when Nigel managed a cough instead of words. Warm liquid sprayed Will's face and neck. He tried talking, to reassure his new friend that everything was fine but nothing came out except a strangled wheeze. He felt Nigel shift and watched as his shaky hand, black with blood that shone in the lightning, came to rest weakly in Katinka's mussed hair.

Nigel's last breath sounded like his wife's name.

Will tried not to panic but it was a losing battle. He grit his teeth as he forced his limbs to move. His arm was trapped between him and Nigel. There was little room for movement but he needed to know. Needed to see if she was all right. The little bundle against his chest was completely still. As gently as he could, he found the spot between her neck and shoulder, rubbing his thumb against unblemished skin. He kept at it even as his hand throbbed in protest. His wrist felt broken.

Will sobbed when there came a faint snuffle out of the silence. Katinka wriggled against him with a frustrated little gurgle. He passed out after she let out a pitiful cry.

Chapter End Notes

I just want to say, Gabi and Nigel were a delight to write. And, yes, they are that Gabi and Nigel. From The Necessary Death of Charlie Countryman. But if you're familiar with the movie Mrs. Winterbourne than, yeah, you probably guessed what part these two had to play... If I'm doing a crossover, I go all out, damn it. Never let it be said that I half-ass.

Also, just for funsies, Will's alias "Aiden Teague" is the character's full name from the Blood and Chocolate novel. I couldn't resist and I have no other excuse other than I am a huge nerd with a dumb sense of humor.

I have more to come. Please feel free to let me know what you think of the story thus far.

Thanks for reading!
~CReed

Chapter Two

Chapter Notes

> Someone told me they are unfamiliar with Mrs. Winterbourne. That is absolutely fine. I'm actually very excited about those who are not, as you are coming into this story with not a lot of foreknowledge of existing plot points. Mind, this a darker version of the typical story that makes up the bulk of that kind of plot, being still in the Hannibal universe, but still, I hope you all stick around and give it a chance. This has been really fun to write. Especially this chapter. :)
>
> And thank you to Sabi for leaving me a comment. I appreciate it. And thanks to everyone leaving kudos. I'm glad you all are letting me know there's some interest in this story, other than my own selfish desires to see these characters in this situation. :D
>
> Please enjoy, dear readers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Two

Will didn't want to open his eyes. He had been awake for about five minutes but remained motionless. If he opened his eyes he would see the damage. There was no pain. Whatever he was on masked everything until it was all a warm haze. He didn't need to see to know he was in a hospital. The smell of antiseptic chemicals tickled his nose. Beeping from a nearby monitor droned on in the otherwise silent room.

If he opened his eyes someone would talk to him. They would tell him things he didn't want to hear but already knew. He knew deep in his soul that a lot of people died. Nigel's face flashed in his mind. The pressure of his body as he shielded him a phantom sensation against his skin. Tears fought through his clenched eyelids, leaking down his temples. He opened his eyes. He wasn't expecting to feel a mix of shock and delight and he gasped at the sight before him.

“Nigel?” His relief was short-lived. Something wasn't right.

Nigel had been sitting calmly beside him in one of the chairs furnishing the hospital room. One leg was crossed over the other in a leisurely way. Cool. Collected. Silent as he waited for Will to gather his bearings, only watching him with a reserved sort of curiosity. At the sound of his name, there came the slightest tightening around his eyes. It was a movement most people wouldn't have caught, but Will did. He was good at noticing little details. At one time, it had been his job to notice such details.

Even just waking from injury and trauma, it wasn't hard for Will to slip back into that frame of mind. Instantly, he took in many crucial details about the man beside him. His hair was

slicked back. It seemed shorter, and even in the dim lighting he could still see highlights within the dark strands that he didn't notice before. The three-piece suit he wore was immaculate. Though the color was near robin's egg blue and the silk tie was pale yellow, he looked rather dashing in the ensemble. The wedding ring Will remembered trailing bloody fingers over as he felt for a pulse was gone. Never there from the look of unblemished skin on his left hand. No traces of that unforgettable tattoo peaking out from the collar of his yellow and white checked shirt.

It took a few tries to speak as Will's raw throat worked to form words. “Who are you?”

“Nigel never told you he had a twin.” Perfect English, that underlying lilt like Nigel's accent.

It was stated as fact. As if the man's suspicions were already confirmed. In a way they were. Will could only shake his head and drop his gaze. He sounded so much like Nigel. Same tone and pitch, same rumbling purr in his voice, and yet entirely different. Where Nigel was loud and playful, a teasing current beneath everything he said, this man was calm, soothing but there was something lurking within. Biting. It put Will on edge, like there was a lion prowling somewhere unseen in the room with him.

“I knew he had siblings. A brother and sister, but he never said...” Will trailed off as he thought over their conversations. The last things Nigel said to him. This must be the “asshole” brother. The only reason he was going to see him after so long was because —“Katinka!”

Will attempted to rise from the bed, groaning in pain as the IV he hadn't noticed before snagged and pulled at the vein in his forearm. Strong hands were instantly at his biceps, pushing with gentle strength until he was once more reclining against starched and scratchy pillows. The man was shushing him, talking gently as if Will were a spooked animal.

“I need you to calm down. Katinka is safe. She's alive. While you settle yourself back under the covers, I'll tell the nurses to bring her to you.”

His relief threatened to overwhelm him. He didn't feel he was crying until a gentle thumb wiped tears from his lashes. Will took a deep breath to regain control of his frayed emotions and looked at Nigel's twin. “Thank you...”

“Hannibal.” Hannibal nodded, as if to himself, when he took a step back. “Think nothing of it.”

Hannibal poked his head out into the hall, murmuring something in what Will guessed was Lithuanian. He came back inside and sat once more in the chair. Will was grateful that Hannibal wasn't speaking, content to wait in silence with him. He was so confused but didn't dare voice his concerns. His thoughts were spiraling so fast he didn't think he would have been able to articulate what he was feeling anyway.

Why would the nurse bring Katinka to him? He was nobody to her. Just the poor bastard who happened to be holding her at the time of the crash. It had to have been a crash. He didn't ask, not wanting the gory details just yet. Bile rose in his throat as the thought that if Nigel didn't survive, perhaps Gabi didn't either occurred to him. She must not have, if she wasn't with her

daughter. Katinka would be an orphan. Would Hannibal, or some other estranged relative, take the child in?

The thought made fresh tears well in his eyes and he had to swallow down the urge to scream. This had all gone wrong so fast. He needed to focus, remember what he was doing. His safe house was still there, waiting for him to arrive and implement the next phases of his and Margot's plans. He would get patched up and go. Once he laid eyes on Katinka. Anything and everything else would have to wait until he saw for himself that she was okay. He owed Gabi and Nigel at least that.

The door opened and in came a woman in cheerfully printed scrubs. Definitely from the children's ward. She stopped cooing at the wrapped bundle in her arms to give Will an encouraging smile. He couldn't explain the joy he felt when he saw her. He couldn't control how he immediately reached for her. His hands shook as he moved the soft white blanket aside to see her face. There she was.

“Hey, Tink.”

Sleepy eyes focused on him and Will smiled down at her. She smelled clean. No traces of smoke or blood. Just lavender soap and a hint of milk on her skin. Will laid her gently on his thighs, her head cradled against his knees, as he started to unwrap her warm cocoon. She fussed for a moment and Will clicked his tongue at her to get her to settle. It was the same kind of sound he would make at his dogs when they got rowdy, and he would have been embarrassed had it not seemed to work on her as well.

He took his time with his inspection. First, he trailed his hands along her arms, then her legs. Ten grabby fingers. Ten squirming toes. She had a bruise on the back of her right calf muscles and he made little noises in sympathy when she whimpered at the touch. He lifted her tiny night shirt. A bloom of color on her right side but nothing too terrible, considering. He gave her soft tummy a pat before he pulled her clothing back to rights. The worst of her injuries seemed to be a scrape on her left cheek and a nick at the top of her left ear. He felt compelled to kiss the abrasion so he didn't fight the urge, laying his lips gently across the roughened skin. Her hand came up to grab his chin, keeping him in place. Poor, sweet girl. He smiled at her and kissed her cheek before wrapping the blanket back the way he found it.

“Nigel was always vague and didn't like telling his family much, but I never thought whenever he mentioned his 'beautiful Gabi' that he was talking about you.”

At Hannibal's words, his hand stopped its gentle folding, flexing for a moment in the edges of embroidered fleece. All of Will's thoughts and concerns came to a screeching halt. And then everything seemed to rush into him, making sickeningly perfect sense. They all thought he was Gabi. They all thought he was something more than a stranger Nigel met during the last trip he would ever take. Will hadn't been carrying any ID on him before the crash. Gabi's, he assumed, was safely tucked away in her purse. All lost in the accident. If it was an accident. Dread tickled cold tendrils along Will's spine as he gave that thought consideration.

If Mason had found him, would the bastard have that much nerve to hurt so many people? He didn't have to be an expert on human behavior to know the answer to that. Mason possibly knowing Will's whereabouts made things even more complicated. Or simpler. Will had a

choice. He could come clean. The story was insane enough to make sense. He could tell Hannibal. Explain how Nigel and Gabi were just two kind strangers with their beautiful baby, sharing space with him the night they died. Or he could disappear into the folds of Nigel's family until Mason lost his scent. He could heal and prepare in safety and make sure Mason never hurt anyone again.

Movement caught his eye and he looked down to see Katinka staring up at him. She had managed to get one arm free from her swaddling blanket and curled rosy-pink fingers around his thumb. Her squeeze was impressive for such a little thing. His decision was made. As he finished wrapping her, he swore to Gabi and Nigel that he would make things right once everyone was safe.

Will took a breath, allowing himself to get swallowed in the emotions and life he was about to take on. “My name is Gabriel. Nigel had a terrible sense of humor and was grossly sentimental.”

He could tell by Hannibal's face, as placid as it was, that the man thought his story was weak. It sounded so to Will. However, Will knew Nigel, he had Katinka in his arms when he was found and he was protected by Nigel's body. Hannibal had no grounds to make open accusations. Another slight shift of facial muscles and Will could see a smile. Or a hint of a smile, teasing at the edges of Hannibal's slender mouth. Will had a feeling Hannibal was aware of his calculations.

“He did often refer to you as his 'angel.'”

Hannibal stood, smoothing down his suit and buttoning his jacket. Will settled Katinka in his arms, speechless and aching, as he watched Hannibal flutter about the room gathering things from the cabinet. In one hand he held a folded pile of clothing and in the other a pair of black leather shoes. He set them in the chair he vacated earlier. There came a knock and Hannibal exchanged a few pleasant words with another nurse before returning to Will with a covered tray.

The thought, and smell, of food made Will grimace as nausea roiled his stomach. “No.” He winced at his tone and tried to soften his next words. “Thank you, but I'm not hungry.”

Hannibal frowned but said nothing as he set the tray to be ignored on the table by the covered window. He came to stand beside Will, watching for a moment before he seemed to gather his thoughts. “May I hold my niece while you dress?”

Will realized he had been pulling Katinka ever closer as the man moved around his space and he immediately offered her to him. His face felt on fire as a blush swept from his forehead to chest. “Of course. I'm so sorry.” His grip tightened for a moment before Hannibal could pull completely away with her. Will made himself keep steady eye contact. It was almost absurd speaking his next fumbling words to a man who looked identical to Katinka's actual father. “You can hold her any time you want. As far as I'm concerned, you don't need permission from me for anything when it comes to Tink.”

That gave Hannibal pause. He swallowed as he looked over Will's face, searching for what Will didn't know. This close, he noticed Hannibal's eyes were an amber kind of hazel. They

would have been unfairly beautiful if they weren't shadowed by dark circles and lined in watery red. “Thank you.” His voice was rough for just a moment before he cleared the emotion away, stepping back as he started gently walking Katinka around the room.

Will pulled the sheets off as he tried to stand. What he found beneath starched cotton made his breath catch painfully in his ribs. He didn't really give much notice to being shirtless when he woke. Too much of his mind had been preoccupied with the revelation of Hannibal existing and then seeing to Katinka. Now there was nothing left to concentrate on but himself. His legs were bruised and cut. Some lacerations had needed stitches. The hospital-standard underwear he wore hid a long gash that ran from his knee to disappear beneath the material. Will felt a pull near his hip when he moved and could guess just how far up the wound reached.

His right hand, his dominant hand, was covered from wrist to fingers in gauze. Some kind of splint held his wrist in place. Whenever he moved it he felt an odd, squishy pressure in the joint. His fingers were swollen and a faint purple but they weren't broken. The worst of it all, however, was his stomach. Will trailed a shaking hand along his abdomen. From his ribs down was wrapped in gauze. He couldn't see the damage but, from just how well he was numbed to the pain, he knew it wouldn't be pretty.

“It looks a lot worse than it is, now. Apparently, when they finally brought you in they didn't know if they were too late.” Hannibal came once more to his bedside, indicating with his head as he patted Katinka's back. “You didn't fracture anything, although I would recommend a cane while you recover. You have a nasty sprain in your wrist. They had to realign your fingers. There will be swelling and pain for a few more days, but they should heal just fine. What had the surgeons worried was the stab wound to your stomach. You lost a lot of blood, but the debris missed all your vital organs and you didn't develop any sepsis.”

Hannibal made it all sound so clinical. It was easy to detach from what happened to him, to those not so lucky on-board the same train. Will nodded his acknowledgment and slid to the edge of the bed. Hannibal once more took to rocking Katinka as he paced. Will reached for the pants. Black slacks that slipped like water up his battered legs. He eased them up and fastened the buttons and zipper all while staying seated. Even that took more out of him than he wanted to admit. The pants fit perfectly but he had never seen them before.

“These aren't mine.”

Hannibal turned on his heel, mid-step, to look over Will's progress. “I took the liberty of buying you something to wear when you're released. When I arrived, they said your clothes were ruined, cut from you.”

“Thank you.” Will couldn't help his tone. To his own ears he sounded small, scared. He didn't hold it against himself too much. He was hanging by a thread.

Will managed to slip the long-sleeve button up over his shoulders. He stood to straighten it. Gunmetal gray twill, black buttons cold and falling through his clumsy grip. His hands were shaking. He only noticed his head was spinning after he flopped down onto the chair. Large, warm hands took hold on either side of his jaw. Immediately Will looked around the room for Katinka. She was on the bed, safely secured in a travel bassinet. Hannibal brought his focus

back to him, demanding his attention even as Will's lungs felt like they were about to burst from his chest.

“Breathe, Gabriel. Take a breath. Like me, see? Good. Try and hold that in. Good. Now out.”

That goddamn name almost sent Will into a screaming madness. He focused through the fog in his mind. All he had to do right now was breathe. He'd worry about *Gabriel* later. Hannibal coached him through another set of slow, even breaths. Only speaking to count the seconds between each inhale and exhale and on. Will appreciated he had yet to reassure him, tell him everything was going to be all right. Nothing was all right. It would never be all right again. Not for Gabi and Nigel. Not for Katinka. Not for Hannibal and his remaining family who had been awaiting a prodigal son's return. Will pushed all of his thoughts and concerns away, locked down tight. All he had to do was keep breathing.

When hyperventilating was no longer a fear, Hannibal tilted his head back to look into his eyes once more. “Would you rather stay another night or so here, instead of coming home?”

“I don't want to be here.”

“Very well.” The corner of Hannibal's mouth twitched. He was pleased with Will's decision. He lifted Will to stand, finishing the buttons up his shirt for him.

Will put a hand on Hannibal's arm to pause his helping him with his socks and shoes. “Everything important I had was on the train.” Hannibal tilted his head towards him. The universal sign of curiosity. Will elaborated, “All of my papers are lost. No identity. No passport. No money. I don't know what to do.” Nothing like this had ever happened to him before. No Plan A through G. A free-fall with nothing to slow his descent or catch him before he hit the unforgiving earth.

Hannibal stood, leaving him to finish getting dressed. “You're family, Gabriel. That's what we're here for: to help you as you focus on your health and that of your daughter's.”

* * * * *

In what seemed only a few moments more, Hannibal was helping him put on a thick winter coat. Some sort of fur, black and softer than anything he had ever felt, lined the collar and Will fought the urge to hide his face in it. Will shook his head at the offered bassinet and held Katinka instead once she was dressed in her own cold weather attire. Hannibal didn't comment over his decision, simply carrying the lace-lined cradle in one gloved hand while keeping the other pressed against the small of Will's back to guide him out of the room.

Will would never be able to describe the hospital. The lights. The smells. The people passing by. He wouldn't remember any of it. It was all a dreamlike blur where things were happening to him, around him, but it didn't register inside him. Whatever was going on, Hannibal seemed to be dealing with it. Will only had the energy and thought to gently rock Katinka, laying his cheek against the warmth of her covered head. She only whimpered now and then, snuffling as she snuggled closer. Such a quiet baby.

And then Hannibal was leading him out the doors. A blast of biting, ice-speckled wind caught him in the face and Will huddled into his coat further, drawing Katinka against him to block her from the worst of it. Despite everything he couldn't help smiling. Nigel was right about the miserable weather. The sounds of yelling caught his attention and, finally, Will thought to take in his surroundings. There looked to be a barricade several yards from the hospital's entrance. A warm arm wrapped around his waist to pull him against a sturdy body. Hannibal turned them from the crowd to guide him limping towards a parking garage.

“Reporters. *Vultures*. Come to catch a glimpse of the victims and survivors of the crash.” It was the first time he heard anything from Hannibal that was outwardly harsh.

“There were others?”

“Some. A few died after they arrived. Many more are still in critical condition.”

“I don't want to be photographed. I don't want them posting her picture all over.”

“Of course.”

They didn't speak again as they escaped the calls and demands from the crowd. Hannibal escorted them to a car parked close to the entrance of the garage. A foreign car. A black Bentley. Hannibal opened the door for him. As Will carefully lowered himself into the front passenger seat, Hannibal took a fussing Katinka from him to settle in the brand new car seat in the back. Whatever they gave him was wearing off. Will winced, laying his hand against his stomach. It was all beginning to throb, from his head to his legs.

When Hannibal got in, Will turned his head towards him. He watched him from where he leaned against the leather head-rest. Sweat was starting to chill his forehead. “How long have I been in the hospital?”

“Eighteen days.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Seventeen days.” Hannibal looked him over before reaching into his coat pocket. “The rest of your family is eager to meet you, Gabriel. However, when my uncle was notified about the crash, I arrived ahead to help make any arrangements at the hospital. After I learned of Nigel, and your condition, I felt it best they remain at home. I didn't know if you would be returning with me when I left.”

“I don't want to stay, but I don't think I should be leaving now. Is it normal to be released so soon after this kind of injury?” There came another one of Hannibal's barely-there smiles, growing into something more visible, when Will's eyes narrowed at the look. A sharp thing. Something that had potential to tear.

Hannibal leaned over to grab a bottle of water from the glove compartment. He took Will's hand and dropped two pills into his palm. “I pulled some strings. I assure you, they released you and Katinka into excellent hands.”

Will swallowed the pills and guzzled the rest of the water. He would kill for some whiskey. “You're a doctor.”

“Surgeon,” Hannibal supplied mildly as he drove them away from the hospital.

Perhaps Gabriel should have known that. Will nodded, running his hands through his hair before rubbing his tired eyes. He winced but ignored the pain as he pressed too hard on the bruises that must cover his face. So many things were going to have to be kept in the shadows. Outright lies. Will almost ached with the need for some semblance of truth to be known, laid bare. The painkillers started working. It cleared away some of the fog.

Sighing, Will looked to Hannibal's stoic profile as the man drove them around a country Will was lost in. “Does the rest of Nigel's family know? About me.”

“I called a few days ago, when you still slept, to tell them that you would make a complete physical recovery. The rooms for you and Katinka had already been prepared. Weeks ago. We had all been looking forward to meeting Nigel's new wife and daughter.”

He had a feeling Hannibal was being purposefully obtuse. “Will that be a problem? I'm not what they were expecting. I'm not Nigel's wife.”

“I told them. The Lecters are a progressive bunch, Gabriel. You will find nothing but sanctuary with us.”

Kind words, meant to reassure. But the tone was clipped and cold. Will wasn't fooled and wouldn't be letting his guard down any time soon. Not around Nigel's twin. There was something about Hannibal. Will had felt it since he first saw him. Something dark hidden beneath the gentle demeanor and handsome looks. The more he was around him—the clearer his head became—the louder the alarms sounded. Instinct poking at him to pay attention. A hunter was prowling in the dark beside him.

Sometimes, Will felt like he was looking into a mirror when he looked at Hannibal.

* * * * *

The drive was long. He couldn't say for sure how long because he fell asleep shortly after his pills kicked in. He was out of the hospital, Katinka was safe, the car was blissfully warm. Once onto the highway, Hannibal had turned on softly playing classical music. Will drifted as the car coasted along rainy roads, soft arias sending him into dreamless peace. The car stopped and the motion of the brakes over gravel woke him in time to see Hannibal unbuckling his seat belt.

Hannibal saw him watching him as he opened the door. “A moment, please.”

Will sat forward, careful of his stomach, and took in his surroundings as he yawned. He had no idea where the hell he was. Long gone were highways and streets of city life. There was nothing around for miles. Just dense dark forest. Hills and meadows and fields. Acres of what looked to be grapevines. A slight whine brought his attention back and Will watched

Hannibal through the rain-streaked windshield as he unlocked a large black iron gate and pushed it open.

Hannibal hurried back to the car, pushing damp hair back from his forehead as he set them once more along their way. Smoothed gravel made a path that wound around a copse of birch trees. Will thought he spied a pond but it was too dark to be certain. Evening was closing in on them. Dark green trees and grass. Swollen gray clouds above. And the monstrosity they drew nearer to was black stone. The sound of the engine couldn't mask Will's gasp.

“Is something wrong,” Hannibal asked as he turned the ignition off, flooding the car with just the sound of soft rain.

“This is a castle.” Because of course it was.

“Yes.” Hannibal looked up at his home. The lights were on at the entrance. Expectant of the coming guests. “We *are* in Europe.”

Will glared at Hannibal who stared back, calm with a little touch of haughtiness thrown in for good measure. Now was not the time for Hannibal to suddenly develop sarcasm. When Will couldn't seem to wrap his mind around the idea, Hannibal huffed. It was such a slight thing but it spoke volumes. He couldn't completely hide his surprise at Will's ignorance.

“My family is an old one. This estate reaches back centuries. Older still was the original Lecter Castle that was destroyed during the war. Before Count Lecter, my father, died, he officially relocated our holdings here for my uncle Robertus' ease of oversight.”

“I had no idea Nigel came from such a wealthy family. Or that he was technically a count.” Thinking back on the man, with his foul mouth and neck tattoo, made the idea even more ludicrous.

“It seems my brother kept a lot from you.” And with that, Hannibal was out of the car and coming around to help Will stand.

He had no bags with him. All Will carried up the steps and through tall doors of the dreary castle was Katinka. Once more, shock rattled through his exhausted body. The outside of the estate was cold and depressing. It wasn't hard to imagine terrible things happening there over the course of a long and bloody history. The interior was completely different.

Will didn't want to think of how much renovations cost to drag this place into the 21st century. No dark corners or freezing stone. The foyer was lit by a gigantic chandelier made of an intricate knot of antlers that hung from the high ceiling. Everything was shining marble and warm, honey-toned woods. Vases of flowers were placed on antique tables. Large embroidered rugs. Paintings that to Will's keen eye looked to be originals. It was warm here. Cozy. Someone had worked hard to keep the place from falling into ruins.

A door off to the side of the room opened and out stepped a woman. She came slowly to him, as if she were afraid he might disappear at the slightest jump. When she came within arm's reach, Will couldn't help smiling once he saw her fully in the light. Genes and Fate seemed to have graced all of the Lecter children with bone structure some would kill for and energy that

sucked him in like a black hole. Tragic, dangerous beauty. Will couldn't say which sibling that sentiment described more. She wasn't as formally dressed as Hannibal, but she was a fan of suits as well, it seemed. Her chocolate brown slacks and white blouse were tailored to hug her tall frame. She tread silently on stockinged feet. Under the lighting her ash-blond hair gleamed when the wavy strands shifted just so. Will wondered if Nigel's hair was the same when he was younger.

Hannibal came to stand at their sides after he hung his coat by the door. “Gabriel, this is your sister-in-law, Mischa. Mischa, this is Gabriel and Katinka.”

Mischa glanced to Hannibal for just a second, pale brown eyes curious. Will could see her processing what Hannibal told her without having to utter the actual words. She needed to speak English and not only did Nigel's spouse turn out to be a man, the man clearly didn't know her name. Then she was smiling at Will, coming closer to gently squeeze his arms and leaned in to kiss his cheeks.

“Hallo, Gabriel. It's so nice to finally meet you and the little one.” She looked down and ran gentle fingers along the edges of Katinka's blanket. Will stilled, breath slowing, as that same hand lifted to caress his hair. It had been growing out before the accident and Will shuddered to think what the mess looked like now. Mischa didn't seem to dislike the fact that she could wrap one of his mousy brown curls around her finger. “Nigel had excellent taste.”

Before he could even try to reply to that, she stepped away. Hannibal was leading another woman to him. Will kept from showing his surprise. He remembered Nigel's rants to him between drags off his cigarette. Nigel had an uncle, so it wouldn't be a stretch to deduce the beautiful Asian woman approaching him was his aunt. Hannibal didn't mention a lover of his own, although that was a possibility. Will forced himself to stop wasting effort guessing. When in doubt, keep his mouth shut. The motto served him well over the years.

“This is my aunt, Lady Murasaki.”

She stepped away from Hannibal to lay a hand over Will's. Her smile was a balm to his raw nerves. “Murasaki is fine, Gabriel. Welcome home.”

Echoing footsteps broke Will's stare and he looked to search for the source. Will found himself stepping forward as a man reached the bottom of the spiraling staircase that led to the mysterious upper levels of the castle. Through the coat he still wore, Will felt warmth at his back.

“This is my uncle Robertus, Gabriel.” Will nodded at the quiet words spoken by his side.

Robertus' approach was slow, but it wasn't like the others. He wasn't afraid to overwhelm Will. It was as if he was taking his time to savor what he found. Will couldn't help his surprise. Perhaps it was because of the castle and hinted wealth or Nigel's insistence that his relatives were conventional bores, but he was expecting someone more gnarled. Ancient. A frightening old man who embodied the conservative beliefs that still clung to the country. A haunting, Dracula type that skulked within the shadows. He was, at the most, in his early seventies but “ancient” would never be a word Will would have used to describe him.

Handsome and youthful. A contender to Nigel and Hannibal's own striking looks. Those same sharp cheekbones, though not as pronounced. A full head of blonde hair that only now was beginning to show signs of faint silver. The soft strands fell into searching eyes. One blue, one hazel. They had tears in them as they looked over Will's damaged form. When Hannibal introduced Will to him, Robertus brought him into a hug, mindful of Katinka and his injuries. He stepped back only to caress Katinka's hair.

“I had been looking forward to meeting you, Gabriel. I was so happy Nigel was finally coming home.” The warmth of his voice seeped into Will's bones. Robertus took hold of Will's jaw, tilting his head up so he could look at him better, his touch careful. “I am terribly sorry for all you have lost, but I hope you stay and find all that you need here.”

“Would you like to hold your grandniece?” It was the only thing Will could think to say. Everything else seemed so useless. Will felt oddly protective of the man and his family, especially when a brilliant smile lit up Robertus' face just from Will's words alone. He swore he would spare them what pain he could for however long he intruded upon their lives.

Robertus took Katinka, supporting her head the correct way and cradling her close. He had eyes for no one else after that. Will smiled as Robertus wandered away from them. Murasaki followed him into the room Mischa had first come out of. Mischa kissed her brother hello, murmuring a soft exchange, before hurrying after Robertus. They all had been anticipating Katinka's arrival. Will couldn't fault them. She was a point of light and joy within their tragedy. Hannibal came around to face Will, picking up his hand in a gentle hold to start peeling the lone glove he wore off. With the bandages and his healing fingers, Will had refused to try to shove his other hand into its mate. Will took the glove from him to put in his pocket as Hannibal begun the process of unbuttoning Will's coat.

“I suggest you take it easy this evening. Join the others in the sitting room to rest. Later you will be helped upstairs.”

“Where are you going to be?”

“I have to start preparing dinner. This time, I insist you eat. You've had nothing but water today. It's not good for you to take medicine on an empty stomach.”

Will didn't feel like arguing. He wondered what Hannibal would do if he requested a Bloody Mary for dinner instead of whatever he had in mind.

Chapter End Notes

There you have it. The rest of the Lecter clan. She is not Japanese, but I couldn't help modeling Lady Murasaki after Gong Li. To give myself a point of reference since she played her in Hannibal Rising and also because I adore Gong Li. She is a beautiful, timeless woman and I think if anyone is going to be a Lady Murasaki type, it's her. Mischa has no point of reference. I just kind of played around a bit, and will continue to

do so with her. I think I rather like who she's turning out to be. And, yes, if you couldn't tell, I modeled Robertus after the late great David Bowie. I was incredibly sad to hear they wanted him to play the part but then the show was canceled and he passed away later. I think it would have been brilliant. Just try and imagine that. David Bowie as Hannibal's uncle...That would have been beautiful.

And also, we meet Hannibal. He is proving, once again, to be a treasure and delight to write.

I hope whoever stopped to give this story a chance enjoyed this chapter. More will come. Please feel free to share your thoughts with me. I love hearing what you think.

Chapter Three

Chapter Notes

With the risk of jinxing myself, I guess I should let everyone reading know that this story has been being updated on Tuesdays. That should continue to be the case, excluding some emergency or unforeseen circumstance.

Thanks again to Sabi for continuing to leave me such lovely comments. I really appreciate how much you're liking the story, and seeing the things you like about it. :D Talking about writing, stories and constructive criticism gives me life. I love it. Also, thank you to TrulyMadlyInLove and Pia_Pia for taking the time to leave a comment. I'm happy to know some readers are enjoying the story. And it's great to see someone who is familiar with Mrs. Winterbourne enjoying this. I know it's kind of a weird combination, but I just really liked the idea of it.

For everyone returning, and new readers stopping by, please enjoy the next installment.

Chapter Three

“I'm happy you were able to get the ingredients I asked for on such short notice, Mischa.” Hannibal smiled at his sister as he carried steaming bowls to the table.

“How could I refuse? You were adamant about needing a certain kind of chicken and berries. I don't ever want to be on the receiving end of your disappointment, especially when it comes to your dinner plans.” Mischa took a sip of wine before unfolding her napkin.

Hannibal set a bowl before Will. “Silkie chicken soup, with ginger, dates and goji berries.”

There was a place beside Will that was purposely set, though the chair remained empty. In honor of those who could no longer dine with them. No one commented on it, explained its presence, but Will knew it for what it was. A tradition in this part of the world. A solemn remembrance and memorial. He tore his gaze from the sight to look at his plate. Will muttered a quiet thanks and waited for everyone else to be served. The steam wafted up to him and he closed his eyes as the scent of herbs and spices filled his senses. Sweet, earthy, soothing. At the sound of silverware tinkling against porcelain, he opened his eyes and took up his spoon. It wasn't scalding but it warmed him all the way down to the pit of his stomach. The subtle flavors burst across his tongue and he enthusiastically swallowed more of the delicate broth. He didn't think he would want food again for at least a month, but his appetite returned with each juicy berry and tender bite of meat.

“Lovely as always, Hannibal,” Murasaki complimented.

“Just the thing for such a day.” Robertus smiled at Hannibal over his glass of wine.

Hannibal accepted their praise as he ate his own serving. Will took the chance to glance around the room as the others talked amongst themselves, filling Hannibal in on their goings-on while he was away. The dining room was perhaps more lavish than the last room he was in when they awaited dinner. Most of the walls were stained a dark cobalt blue. Exposed stone, polished black, gave the rest of the walls an absorbing kind of effect. Cozy and elegant. An important room. A near reverential atmosphere that Will could feel vibrating all around him. The fireplace almost took up the length of one wall. Above it hung a painting that suspiciously resembled a Correggio. A fire crackled as they ate. On the opposite wall several shelves held pots of fresh herbs. In his exploration, Will's gaze met Hannibal's across the table, over an arrangement of purple anemones and white freesia. He looked down to stir his soup.

“You don't have to be social, Gabriel. You have been through so much in the last few days. But, is there anything you wish to know,” Murasaki asked from her place to the right of Robertus at the head of the table. Her dark eyes were sad, smile soft.

Will took a sip of the water at his elbow. The ice clinked against the crystal glass. It tasted faintly of lemons. “You have a beautiful home.” He made himself speak louder after his statement came out hushed and hoarse. “I never guessed the size of your estate. Seems secluded, though. Do you work from home, or do you travel far when you're not here?” Small talk was never anything Will excelled at, but that didn't mean Garbiel couldn't try.

“Thank you. I am proud of my family's ancestral home. Hannibal and Mischa have done wonders with Murasaki to make it not so cold and lonely.” Robertus smiled at Will, encouraging his curiosity. “I am busy enough keeping our accounts organized without having a job, any longer. Before I retired, I was a banker. Tell me if you find this all too boring. I do not know what dear Nigel might have told you.”

“Not at all. I'd love to know anything you want to tell me.” It was true. He had always been a curious man. The details he kept discovering about the Lecters teased his appetite, left him wanting more.

“My love is a true Renaissance woman.” Robertus lifted Murasaki's hand to lay a kiss across pale skin. The gesture was familiar and made Will swallow a lump growing ever larger in his throat. The Lecter men seemed an amorous group. “Philosopher, musician, poet and designer.”

Murasaki smiled, keeping hold of Robertus' hand while taking another taste of soup. She dabbed at her mouth with her napkin. “I experiment with many arts and disciplines, though I am not as skilled as our Mischa.”

When Will looked to Mischa she shrugged, tearing apart a seed-encrusted roll to dip in her bowl. “Publish a few books, paint a few trees—suddenly people act as if you're William Blake.”

“You are too modest,” Murasaki chided gently. “Mischa's landscapes are highly-sought pieces.”

“The large painting in the sitting room. Above the fireplace.” Will had stared at the thing all while the Lecters played with Katinka. He couldn't place the artist at the time.

“Yes.” Mischa seemed shocked, pleased, at his guess. “There is a meadow I like to visit often on this land. One day, as I sat watching shafts of sunlight break through the dark clouds passing overhead, a stag came out of the trees. Its antlers were covered with moss and flowers. I had never seen anything like it before. Nor have I since.”

“It's beautiful.”

“Thank you, Gabriel. It's my favorite work.” Mischa smiled, toying with the stem of her glass, dinner mostly forgotten. “And what of you? Nigel never had the desire nor patience for art, but it seems something still attracted him to the creative. Did you steal his heart with your music, along with your pretty face?”

They must have known about Gabi's profession then. Of course. Nigel couldn't have been that tight-lipped. Will felt a wave of sickness flush hot over him. Let them think it was only because of Mischa's teasing. He steeled his nerves. In for a penny...

“Yes, I was a musician. The cello, mainly. I don't play for the symphony anymore. With Katinka and everything...I don't have any family. Nothing important was keeping me anchored in the states. So, when I was offered a job to work with an orchestra in Bucharest, I took it.” The best lies were peppered with truth. Will sprinkled facts within the story. There was no need to completely lie and he found he didn't want to. Judging from what they said, and the ease with which they acted around one another, Will made a guess about Nigel and Gabi's history. There were no nerves rising up in him as he spoke, making him second-guess; he was usually right in his deductions. “A few months into my life in Romania, the symphony was to play at a banquet one of Nigel's venues was hosting. That was four years ago. We'd been together, in some way, ever since.”

Murasaki smiled. “That is lovely. I am happy to learn he found someone he felt so deeply for. Nigel hardly kept in contact. In fact, up until three months ago, we didn't know Nigel was in such a committed relationship, let alone had a child.”

It had all been for Gabi. Obviously, the only reason he contacted them was because Katinka had been born and Gabi wanted them to know. About her, about them. Nigel could no longer keep his life from them. The thought saddened Will but also fanned his curiosity. What happened to Nigel to make him run so far from his family?

“Yes. Nigel never mentioned you.” Hannibal interrupted his thoughts once again. It was the first time he had spoken since dinner began, content to watch and listen. “Is that how he was to the rest of the world, as well? Keeping a vague shroud around his life? Around you?” When Will only looked at him, he elaborated, “Romania is not a friendly place to gay couples.”

“We managed.”

“You're not wearing a ring. But Nigel wore one. Did you live separately? Or were you together under the guise of roommates?”

Clever. It seemed Hannibal was finally letting some of his suspicions surface. “We managed,” Will repeated. “We were together, and we didn't need approval in the eyes of the government. Nigel didn't need anyone's approval.” Will gave Hannibal his own little smile, barely a twitch and just for him to see. He shouldn't toy with the man but found the idea irresistible.

Hannibal ignored the jab, sipping from his glass of dark red wine. “And Katinka? How did she come about? Between two men, a pregnancy has to be meticulously planned, I'm sure.”

“We had a surrogate. Katinka is Nigel's.”

Teeth showed in Hannibal's smile. There seemed to be a flash of something like amusement in his eyes. He was enjoying the interrogation and Will's immediate responses. “How lucky you are, then, to have found someone to pass on both your exact coloring.” He leaned the slightest bit forward and Will felt his heart race. No one else seemed to notice the change in Hannibal's stance. “Katinka's eyes are a startling blue, just like yours.”

“Enough with your interview, Hannibal.” Mischa interrupted their exchange. She finished her wine and poured herself another glass. “Don't be rude. Gabriel would probably rather not dwell on such things at the moment. Always so curious.”

“Too curious, you have often said.” Hannibal didn't seem angry. He smiled at Mischa in an indulgent way. “I'm never rude. However, you are right. I'm sorry, Gabriel. I shouldn't bombard you with questions, remind you of Nigel right now.”

“It's fine.” They were at a cease-fire, for now. “I need to be reminded of Nigel.”

That seemed to take Hannibal aback. He gave Will a considering glance-over before standing to begin clearing the table. “Even so, you need a reprieve from stressful thoughts, even of Nigel. There will be time for my questions later,” he promised.

* * * * *

Mischa insisted on finishing the clean-up. Murasaki and Robertus bid Will a good night before retiring somewhere in the castle. Will took up Katinka once more, rocking her in his arms after she finished her bottle. He was on his own long enough for Hannibal to disappear only a few minutes before he asked Will to follow him. They ascended the staircase Will spied earlier. The landing opened into a brightly lit hall. More antiques and paintings. Their steps were muffled by plush rugs.

“You'll be staying in Nigel's old room. I had it all aired out. You should find everything you need for Katinka. If not, let me know. My room is down the hall, just there, on the left.” Hannibal pointed to a door across the hall. “Don't hesitate to come to any of us should you need anything.”

“Thank you. Is Mischa's room near yours?”

“Mischa commandeered the caretaker's cottage years ago. Robertus and Murasaki have the entire third floor to themselves. We'll give you a proper tour when you're not so exhausted.”

Hannibal ushered him through the door with a hand to his back.

With a flick of a switch, the room flooded with a soft light. Rooms. It was hard to imagine Nigel, younger or otherwise, living here. The furniture was dark wood, antique. A lot of it, from chairs to the four carved columns and boards of the bed, was inlaid with what Will had a suspicion was mother of pearl. Decorated without modern tastes taken into account. However, the large desk off to the side looked like space was made for a computer. A phone sat plugged in and ready for use. Someone had started a fire. It blazed to the side of the room, opposite the large bed.

Hannibal led him to a set of double doors within the bedroom. At one time, perhaps it was used as a parlor. Now it was a baby's room. Will slowly entered. It felt sacred. A lot of thought and attention, love and care, went into the preparation. The furniture was heirloom. Possibly Nigel's or Hannibal's. Maybe even Mischa's. The crib was a large, sturdy thing. Polished mahogany. The only new items were the purple fleece and satin that covered the bed. A toy lamb was tucked to one corner. Above it, a mobile of glittering stars and planets hung.

“May I?” Hannibal motioned towards Katinka.

Will readily handed her over. She was starting to get fussier, already had her formula at the end of such a busy day and wanting sleep. Katinka was having no more of being passed around and began to squirm and whine. Hannibal pressed his lips to the crown of her head, whispering soft words in a language Will didn't have a hold on yet. As she quieted down, Hannibal brought her to a changing table. Everything was stocked and he knew where to reach when he needed wipes and cream, a fresh diaper. Will watched as Hannibal made quick, gentle work of changing Katinka. Hannibal made a soft humming sound of reprimand as her legs flailed about, but caught her escaping limbs without too much trouble as he slipped a soft yellow onesie on her.

Will stayed back as he watched, transfixed. The lion was still in the room with him, but it was busy kissing the fragile palms of a defenseless cub. Katinka was mostly asleep when Hannibal lowered her to the softness of her new bed. Hannibal took another moment to watch her, pulling the soft violet blanket higher. When he turned, he motioned for Will to follow, turning the light off as they went. He pointed to one of the chairs in the bedroom near the hearth.

“Wait here, please.”

Will watched as he disappeared into yet another room adjoined to the bedroom. From what he could make out from his position, it was a bathroom. Hannibal puttered around within for a few minutes. There came the sound of running water. He returned with a bundle in one hand and a glass of water in the other. Before anything could be said, he handed Will the water and more pills. Will took them with no hesitation. Through the last part of the evening he was starting to feel an ache in his abdomen and head. His legs were on fire. Only after Will finished his water did Hannibal move on. He took the glass to set it on the small table beside his chair and then crouched before him.

Their cease-fire seemed to still be in effect. Will kept quiet, watching as Hannibal took up his hand to begin unwrapping it. He couldn't help hissing when he finally saw the damage. His wrist was a swollen, black and purple mess. The joint around his thumb had the same bruising. His fingers were swollen but not as badly. They were a blend of pink and purple that mesmerized Will.

Hannibal hummed in sympathy, holding out his own hand and splaying his fingers. “Can you move your fingers? Like this?” He demonstrated by slowly moving his own.

Will tried, only able to move them a fraction before it hurt. His wrist felt like a bubble was swishing around inside it with every move. “That's all I can do.”

Hannibal nodded, positioning the splint and setting to work applying gauze. “That's fine. I suspected as much. I just had to make sure we're still dealing only with a sprain. It looks good, considering. Now,” Hannibal sat back on his haunches once finished with his hand and looked up to Will, “Open your shirt, please.”

Will did as instructed, wincing as his fingers worked the buttons out. He managed on his own this time. Hannibal leaned forward once he could see his abdomen and ran his hand along the bandages. He pressed very lightly on his stomach. “Does this hurt?”

“It's sore. Like I had an intense workout.”

Hannibal smiled at that, nodding as he pressed lower. “In a way, you did. Your muscles aren't used to the trauma they endured, including the surgery and stitches. You'll be sore for a while still. However, your bandages are dry and clean. I see no sign of discharge or bleeding. We can change them tomorrow.” He leaned up further, a line of heat that Will could feel even without direct contact. “If you'll allow me a few minutes more.”

He brushed Will's hair from his forehead, pressing delicate fingers along the right side. It was numb. Will remembered the pain as his head knocked into something sharp during the crash. He couldn't feel the wound but guessed that's why his head ached.

“Is it bad?” Will hadn't seen for himself yet most of the damage his body took. He didn't really want to.

“When you were brought in, yes. Quite a nasty cut from here to here.” Hannibal traced from almost the middle of his forehead to his temple. “Whatever hit you chipped bone. But the stitches were neat and small. You'll have a handsome scar, after it all heals.” He leaned back once more, finished.

Will scoffed at that. Silver-lining, he supposed. “Thank you.”

Hannibal only shrugged as he stood, returning the extra bandages and gauze to the bathroom. “I require no thanks. You were released into my care. Think of this as any other examination.” He came to stand before Will just as he dragged himself off the plush chair. “Toiletries have been set in the bathroom for you. There are clothes in the armoire and dresser. Your medication is in the bathroom cabinet behind the mirror.”

Will stopped Hannibal from turning away with a light hold around his wrist. “Thank you,” he repeated. “I know you have your doubts. About everything. I don't blame you. I just,” Will took a breath to try and calm his shattered nerves. “You've been kind, when you don't need to be.”

There was something, for just a moment, in Hannibal's eyes. A flash of something that wasn't quite anger. It was intense and it felt as if he was staring straight to the back of Will's skull. Panic quickened his pulse. Did Hannibal know? Suddenly, Will had the almost overwhelming urge to tell him everything. He wanted it bad enough that he clenched his jaw tight, afraid of what would escape if he opened his mouth. Then the look was gone. Hannibal stepped closer, wrist slipping free of Will's hold. He raised his hand to brush Will's hair back again.

“You're family.” As if that was all the explanation he needed to give. “Goodnight, Gabriel.”

Will watched him go, closing the door on his way out. His touch lingered. Before getting ready for bed, Will wandered back into Katinka's room. She was completely out. He smiled as he watched her. Her blanket had shifted as she wiggled about so he tucked it once more snugly around her. Will thought back on Hannibal's treatment of them both as he traced her cheek with his knuckle.

He gave her a kiss and sighed as he turned the light off. “Oh, Tinker Bell, I am so fucked.”

* * * * *

Snow fell recently. Not a flurry in the air, but the ground and trees were covered. It came to his shins. Glittering in the moonlight. There was no wind. No sound of birds or night animals. Nothing but the cold and the snow and the starry sky. Everything had a muffled quality. A pocket of reality where no one else existed.

It felt like home. Like his little sanctuary tucked into the woods of Wolf Trap, Virginia. It wasn't. Will knew it wasn't. Yet the familiarity settled him. He took a step and then another. Soon he was almost to the dark treeline.

There came the sound of footsteps. Light. Barely breaking the fragile shell of ice over the snow. He stopped, eyes scanning his surroundings. Something was building in his chest. He couldn't decide if it was apprehension or anticipation.

Out of the darkness stepped a figure. A hulking thing. It came to him, out of shadows and in between shafts of silver light. A stag. Or something like a stag. So close Will felt its humid breath against his face. Majestic and black as pitch. Glossy black feathers ringed around its neck like a mane. The stag watched Will as he watched the stag.

Their eyes met, man and beast, and Will felt powerful as he took in its form. He felt a surge of completion course through him. The sound of a scream came faintly to his ears. The smell of blood was on the air. Will looked once more to the stag as it gazed at the moon. For good or ill, he found what he had been searching for.

* * * * *

It was the stiffness from lying in one position for too long that finally woke him. Will groaned as he dragged himself from the bed to the bathroom, shedding the clothes he hadn't bothered changing out of the night before on his way. He winced as bright light flooded the bathroom after he groggily felt for a switch. Only after he took more pills and guzzled two glasses of water did he focus on his reflection in the mirror.

It was bad. Will hadn't expected anything good, but it was still a lot to take in, to accept as his face and body. He peered at the cut on his head. Tender and irritated, he carefully pressed a cool washcloth against it. There were other spots. Abrasions and scrapes. A cut across the bridge of his nose. And where there weren't cuts, there were bruises. Along his jaw and cheeks, on his eyes. At least most of them were healing into a faint yellow. He tore his gaze from his battered form and began the normality of his morning routine.

After he finished brushing his teeth and setting the tangled curls on his head to some kind of order, he looked longingly at the large shower and equally spacious bathtub. The thought of hot water made him want to whimper, but he had a feeling soaking in a scalding tub or standing under a steaming cascade of water was something his doctor wouldn't approve of. A whore's bath would have to do. Will smiled as he went about filling the sink with warm water and sudsing up his cloth. It was just like on the road trips he used to take with his dad when they didn't have time or money for a hotel room.

He spent a few minutes once finished trying to find a hamper. It didn't sit well with him to leave a mess behind and tried to clean up the best he could without pulling any stitches. Dressed and clean, Will crept into Katinka's room. The crib was empty. He pushed his panic down. There were four other people under the same roof who could have her. He left the room, searching for anyone else. It was too quiet in a place he wasn't familiar with.

Downstairs, in the sitting room where he was deposited the evening before, Will found Katinka. Murasaki sat on the floor in front of the couch, the large windows casting them in the late morning sun. She laughed and smiled at the baby, who gurgled and giggled as she was raised into the air over and over.

“Good morning, Gabriel,” Murasaki smiled as he came further into the room. “I hope you weren't alarmed when you didn't find Katinka in bed.”

“Good morning. Only for a second before I remembered where we were. Thank you for seeing to her.” Katinka was dressed for the day, clean and happy.

Murasaki waved his thanks away as she bounced Katinka gently on her knee. “Katinka was crying early this morning. When Hannibal checked on you both, you were deep asleep. He took Katinka for her breakfast, so you could keep sleeping.”

“Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't hear anything.”

“You needed your rest.” Will looked to see Hannibal sitting in the corner of the room, reading his tablet. He hadn't noticed him and now Hannibal was standing to cross the room. He looked over Will's form before nodding. “Sleeping late, uninterrupted, did a lot of good. Did you take your medicine?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Come with me.”

Will followed because he wasn't sure what to do with himself otherwise. He felt guilty leaving Murasaki on her own. “Should I bring Katinka?”

“She's fine for now,” Hannibal readily replied as he led Will through the castle.

“I don't want Murasaki to think I'm dumping Katinka on her. What if she's busy?”

Hannibal chuckled as they went through the dining room and into a large kitchen. “Murasaki makes her own schedule. She would love nothing more than to spend the day spoiling the child. Sit here, please.” He pulled out a chair at a small table in front of one of the large windows. His charcoal jacket was left to hang on the back of the other chair and he made quick work of rolling up the sleeves of his coral silk shirt.

“What about the others?”

Hannibal didn't pause to answer as he took a pan down from the rack hanging above the stove. He fetched eggs, vegetables, milk and a covered dish from the refrigerator. “Robertus is shut away in his office, where he will stay until probably this afternoon. I can't predict the whims of my sweet Mischa. Who knows what has captured her fancy today, or when she'll reappear?”

Will watched Hannibal float about the kitchen. Melting butter. Pouring milk. Whisking eggs. A pinch of seasonings here and there. His knife sure and sharp as he sliced tomatoes, spinach and mushrooms. To and from the refrigerator. Back and forth from the stove. It was like a dance. Soon the fragrant smell of eggs and the sizzling of fat filled the air. Will's mouth watered. Hannibal came to him bearing two plates, one he placed before Will.

“It's a little late for breakfast, but a nice protein scramble is just as good for brunch. Enjoy.”

Hannibal tucked into his own food as soon as Will put a forkful of fluffy eggs in his mouth. Next, he speared a piece of sausage with some tomato. He couldn't help the little noise he made as the flavor flooded his mouth.

“This is delicious. Thank you.”

Hannibal glanced at him, then at his scramble before a smile flickered at the corner of his mouth. “My pleasure.” He left to make them coffee before returning with a steaming cup for Will. “What would you like to do today, Gabriel?”

Suddenly not as hungry, Will pushed his plate away. “I don't want to impose, but is there a smart phone I could use? Or a computer? If no one is comfortable with me using theirs, I could go to a library or Internet cafe.”

“It's no trouble at all.” Hannibal dotted a half of a scone with clotted cream and marmalade before placing it on Will's plate. He started preparing the other half for himself. “Tell me your preferred brand and model, and I will have them to you by this afternoon.”

“I can't ask you to buy new electronics for me, Hannibal. It's not right to expect more when you all have provided so much already.”

“I disagree. I don't need to remind you that you came here with nothing but the clothes you wore. Katinka is in the same way. Like you said: everything you had with you is gone. You are countries' away from home. It would be unspeakably discourteous of me if I did not help you achieve some sort of stability after all you've been through. And I imagine, as have you, that your life is moving on with or without you. It's important to establish contact with those worried about you.”

The rush of gratitude he felt was nearly overwhelming. For Hannibal to understand, to voice his growing concerns—even without knowing all of Will's secrets, was a comfort he didn't expect to find any time soon. “Thank you. I'll pay back what I owe, once everything evens out.”

Hannibal tilted his head in agreement. “If you feel you must, we'll work something out. Now, finish your food.” He smiled as he poured Will more coffee.

Chapter Four

Chapter Notes

Chapter Four marks the beginning of Act Two, and some new plot developments. Hope you all like what I'm setting up. ;) I also hope the story isn't dragging. I'm trying to pay attention to pace and making sure all of the necessary plot points are being hit. It's making sense to me, but I am right in the thick of it and might not see it as you all do. Big thanks to Pia_Pia, Scully630 and AGlassRoseNeverFades for taking the time to leave me some comments last chapter. I super appreciate it!

I hope everyone who stops by enjoys this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Act Two:

The Bait

Chapter Four

True to his word, Hannibal brought him everything he requested. In between playing with and caring for Katinka, Will spent the rest of day, and the next few, setting up the computer as he needed it. A part of him wanted to lecture Hannibal on the money he spent. Will had specific needs, but the man went above and beyond. He even supplied Will with a new tablet and phone—attached to his own cell plan. Another part of himself already knew not to bother. Hannibal would spend however much on whatever he wanted.

Will promised to take exceptional care of everything and return it as soon as possible. Until then, he had a lot of work to do.

Unfortunately, he was still fatigued. Even a few minutes at a time spent organizing or being with Katinka or the Lecters took a lot of energy. He couldn't seem to get his body to do what he wanted. Often, all he had the desire to do was sleep. Which the Lecters encouraged. He knew they didn't approve of him out of bed as much as he was, but them waiting on him and taking care of him made him sick with guilt whenever he thought too deeply of it.

He had no right to take advantage of their hospitality in such a way. It made him want to get out of their hair as soon as possible. Once he found Margot, once he healed, he would leave them to their lives and finish what he started with Mason Verger.

Will fought the urge to rub at his eyes, already experienced with the pain he caused at poking tender bruises. He lamented for not the first time the loss of his glasses but didn't dare say anything. He didn't want a random Lecter popping up and bundling him into a car for an eye exam. The only thing to do was ignore his discomfort and keep going.

All of his encryption was now in place. Safeguards on top of safeguards. He finally approached the website with the message board he and Margot agreed upon for contact. There would be several pages to go back through. His stint in the hospital lost him valuable time. However, Margot would know what to do even if he wasn't around to tell her. The most important thing she could do at the moment, they both could do, was go to ground.

Will didn't bother searching for information on himself. Most likely, Aiden Teague was missing and presumed dead. He'd let that status remain.

There was nothing new on Mason's activities either. Will was aware of the bounty he had on him and Margot. Nothing usually came of it. He called the tip line once, after he first left the states. Far from Bucharest. Just for fun. Though there was interest in collecting the bounty, no one seemed to supply Mason with substantial information on their whereabouts. The amount was still the same. Mason still wanted them both. Preferably alive.

He was five pages into backlog when there was a knock on his bedroom door. It opened and in came Mischa. He could hear her checking on Katinka. The baby had settled for a nap and Will took advantage of the quiet time he had. Mischa came further into the room once her curiosity was sated and plopped down on a sofa near the fireplace.

“Have you eaten recently?”

“Yes. Your brother is very adamant that I have three square meals a day, along with snacks in between,” Will said as he finished typing up a message for the board in case Margot checked.

“Have you been out today?”

“I took a very short walk with Murasaki this morning.” Will closed everything down and turned in his chair to look at her. She had a certain kind of tone to her questions. Leading up in a round-about way. “You want something.”

“I do.” Mischa watched him over the back of the seat, chin resting on her arm that lay across the velvet cushion. A smile began to curl her lips. A fox's smile. When he gave her no further prompting she caved, pouting. “Gabriel, please let me take you and Katinka out today.”

“I don't know.” The thought was a little terrifying, even without a bounty on his head. “I don't think that's a good idea.”

“It's a very good idea. You need to get out.”

“I've been out. I did my walking.” His legs were hardly hurting any more, other than a slight twinge in his ankle and knee now and again. But he blamed Lithuania's lovely weather more for that than his injuries.

“I don't mean around the estate. You need civilization. You need cafes. And bookshops. And to see that life is continuing on.”

It wasn't an act when her words made him swallow a lump of sadness clogging his throat. Nothing had been an act. Though he wasn't really tied to the Lecters, Will was mourning.

Any moment of peace he felt became eclipsed with his remorse for Nigel and Gabi. They were gone and he remained. Undeserving of his fate while their lives were cut too short. All Will could do was honor them, the surviving Lecters, and throw himself into his work. Mischa rose and came to crouch before him, hand settling over his.

“You can be sad, Gabriel. You can miss Nigel. But don't shut yourself away. He wouldn't want that.”

Will had to turn from her kind gaze. “It feels wrong, like I'm trespassing. I don't belong here.”

Mischa reached up to pat his cheek. “You belong nowhere else but here.” She stood and pulled him up with her. “How about this? We won't go anywhere specific. Let me take you and Katinka for a drive. I can show you the way to the nearest cities.”

“That would probably be a good idea. I have no clue where I'm at.” Will couldn't help smiling as Mischa brought him his coat. “I have a feeling I'm not ever going to be able to say 'no' to you.”

“Don't feel too bad about that. No one can say 'no' to me.” She kissed his cheek. “Just ask Hannibal.”

* * * * *

The problem Will could foresee with Mischa was that she had a gradual form of persuasiveness that got her exactly what she wanted. A car ride for fresh air grew into showing Will the roads to take from Castle Lecter to get to the main highway. Showing him the way to the main highway turned into a chance to show him smaller towns that popped up before any chaos from the major city swelled before them. One town was so calm, so picturesque, that Will readily agreed to stop and have a coffee at a place Mischa was a patron of. Soon, Will found himself settling Katinka into a child's seat at the bistro table beside him and having milk tea with Nigel's sister.

“No one really can say 'no' to you, can they?” Will marveled at his afternoon's outcome as a waitress set their steaming drinks and a plate of fresh pastries down between them.

“And aren't you glad you didn't?”

Will took a sip and sighed at the sweet warmth of the tea. “It was a nice drive.”

“Just what the two of you needed. It's not good for you, Gabriel, hiding your pretty face away in your room all the time. I don't know how you do it, honestly. I hardly ever use my computer, and I couldn't tell you where my phone is at the moment.”

He couldn't help the breath of laughter at her disdain for technology. “I just need to take care of some things. I feel so disconnected. Any kind of normality makes me feel less like I'm fading away.”

“That's fine. Just don't bury yourself under whatever obligations you think you have. We're not going to let you fade away.”

Will drank his tea and ate his pastries. He watched Mischa as he did. She toyed with the handle of her cup, mostly ripping her own pastry apart without actually eating it. When his tea was half finished and he gave Katinka one of her jingly toys to keep her busy, he finally broke the silence. “What's on your mind?”

Mischa smiled, not meeting his eyes. “You and Hannibal have an uncanny ability of reading people. Did you know that?”

“I didn't. Nigel was like that too.”

“He was?” Her voice shook just for a moment.

“Yes. It didn't take him long to see into things.”

“What else?”

“What do you mean?”

“Just...Tell me more about Nigel. Please? He left home when I was thirteen and I never saw him again. He was finally coming back and...” She dipped a sugar cube into her black coffee, letting half of it soak before biting into it.

“What do you want to know?”

“Anything.”

“Within the first moments of knowing him, I thought, 'this man is terribly rude.'” Will found himself smiling, shaking his head. “But he was also disgustingly charming, so it didn't matter.”

“Really?”

“God, yes. That man could have charmed the panties off a nun.” Mischa laughed and Will wanted to tell her more. He wished he had more to tell. “He was a rogue. A chain-smoking, tattooed, devilishly handsome sweet-talker. When he wanted to be.” Will kept out the fact that the man possessed the same kind of dangerous aura as his twin.

“Tattoo?”

Will hummed as he nodded, finishing his tea. “A half-naked woman. On his neck.”

“Oh my.”

Mischa didn't know what to say to that. Her thoughts were on Nigel. Arranging the details she now knew around the brother she once had. When they returned to the car she hugged him tight before they started back.

* * * * *

On the way towards Castle Lecter a car met them going the opposite direction. It sped by and Will couldn't help noting the color and model. A cheaper rental. Dull blue. Mischa watched it fade down the road in the rear-view mirror.

“Who was that,” Will asked.

“I don't know. Regina's not due out here for another two days. No one I know drives a car like that.”

“Regina?”

“She comes every other week to help clean.”

Will mulled what he knew over, voicing his growing concerns. “Do you think it had to do with the accident?”

Mischa considered his question before shrugging. “It's possible. There are no other homes out this way. Just our land. Very rarely do we even get someone who is lost.”

No other cars were seen in either direction. The gates were closed. It gave Will some relief that Mischa had to unlock it before they could continue on, locking it up tight once they were through. Nothing changed since they had left. No other cars in the driveway. However, Mischa and Will spotted Robertus at the same time. The man was walking in the lawn, keeping his eyes on the sky. Clouds were slowly rolling back in. A short reprieve from Autumn storms.

Mischa left Will to tend to Katinka as she went to her uncle. Perhaps more had been learned of the crash. Will understood her curiosity, her need to know if anything new had surfaced. He took his time unbuckling Katinka. The drive riled her up and he got a face-full of soft blue bunny more than once as he gathered her up. With a giggling baby squirming in his hold, Will joined Robertus and Mischa. They were speaking Lithuanian.

“Everything all right,” he asked.

“A man came to the gates. Caused a ruckus,” Mischa told him. She wasn't pleased.

Robertus didn't seem concerned, reaching out to take hold of one of Katinka's flailing hands. “I only heard him honking and yelling because I went for a walk.”

“Did he say what he wanted?” The people Will knew were looking for him wouldn't have made their presence obvious.

“I could hardly understand what he was saying. He was demanding to see Nigel. I tried to tell him what happened, but he wasn't listening. He was very strange. I told him to leave.”

“What did he look like,” Mischa asked.

“He was young, American—younger than you,” Robertus gestured to Will. “Dark hair, dark eyes.”

“And he was asking for Nigel?” Mischa clarified. When Robertus nodded, recognition filled her eyes. “I think I know who you're talking about. Well, not *know*. I ran into a man like that in town. He seemed to know about Nigel and Gabriel. He asked a lot about you.” She looked at Will, worried.

“When was this?” Will passed Katinka over to Robertus.

“Ages ago. I forgot about it, actually. I think a few days after the accident, before they officially identified you and Katinka.”

Being reminded of it hurt Robertus and Mischa. It would have been a chaotic time. To hear about Nigel, but not yet know what happened to Gabi and Katinka. Wondering for days if they would ever know. Will looked down the winding road to the gate before giving Mischa's arm a gentle squeeze.

“I'm sure it's nothing. Maybe one of Nigel's colleagues. We'll figure it out.”

The idea that someone was skulking around, bothering the Lecters, set off a quiet rumbling of interest in the back of Will's mind. That more than anything made Will feel closer to his old self. He would wait and watch, and if he needed to, he would strike.

* * * * *

Murasaki caught Will on his way inside. He had walked down to the gate with Robertus and Mischa, letting their calm chatter settle his nerves. All the while he made note of the climbable walls and the footholds in the intricate designs of the iron of the gate. The Lecters should invest in a dog or two, he couldn't help but think. Murasaki asked after Katinka and, when he told her it was about time for her next bottle, she insisted on feeding her. Will never wanted Katinka's family to feel they had less rights to her time. So, he wrestled Katinka out of her tiny coat and booties, kissed her head and left them to it.

He was on his way to drop off Katinka's things when he heard voices down the hall from their rooms. A voice. Raised more than usual. Will tossed their coats and investigated the sound. It came from down the hall past Hannibal's room. The door was ajar. He thought nothing of stepping inside, too curious to care for a thing like bad manners.

Any other time, he would have been shocked and delighted at the sheer amount of books he saw. When he first arrived, and much more lucid, Robertus told him the layout of the castle. He knew there was a library, a few in fact, within the castle, but it was still a sight. The walls were shelves. Crammed with books and trinkets. Nothing seemed in disrepair. Two floors of wall-to-wall books. Will spied a few rolling ladders here and there. The room was lit up by the gigantic window on the opposite side of the entrance, overlooking the woods and large pond in the distance.

What was more interesting than the countless treasures he could probably find, was the man pacing back and forth before the large wooden desk that was positioned in the middle of the room. Hannibal was speaking with someone on the phone. Sharp, acidic. He wasn't yelling. As of yet, Will had seen nothing from him except subtle emotions. Usually hovering somewhere between constant secret amusement and curiosity. Even when he was annoyed. It

was unbecoming to openly show anger. As was to show disappointment in loud, crude language or mindless violence.

A man like Hannibal didn't need to yell.

It was chilling, hearing Hannibal's mother tongue in such a way. Cold, authoritative, hinting at just how upset he was with the person on the phone. Will came further into the room, resting his hand against the top of one of the overstuffed leather chairs. Hannibal glanced his way but continued on with his conversation. He might have been verbally eviscerating his caller, but Will was welcomed to linger. Hannibal turned his back on him. The call ended. He carefully laid his cell phone on the desk, perfectly aligned with the closed notebook and fountain pen holder. He leaned forward, hands flat on the polished wood.

Will admired the broad line of his shoulders, impressive even hidden beneath the finely tailored line of his dark blue and brown plaid suit. He counted Hannibal's deep, steady breaths. Three. “What's happened?”

Hannibal took another moment of silence before straightening and faced him. “That was the police, in charge of handling the pending investigations on the crash. They still haven't released much information.” A ripple crossed over his face, as if the man was halfway to a snarl before thinking better of it. “They refuse to release Nigel's remains. Or anyone's, for that matter. When I enquired as to why, they proceeded to be purposefully evasive.”

There was a niggling sense of apprehension buzzing about the back of Will's mind. If the crash was caused under suspicious circumstances, especially by someone with the money and power to stall any investigation into it, then this whole ordeal could last a long time. Or until that person was stopped. It felt like something Mason had a hand in. He loved tangling things up in politics and red tape. Loved corrupting the people who were supposed to protect everyday civilians from just those things.

He didn't voice his concerns, he couldn't. “I don't know how it is here, but I know that there can be a lot of backlog and confusion when something like this happens in the states.” He softened his words as best as he could. “I'm sorry you all have to go through this.”

Hannibal came to stand with him, placing his hand near to Will's on the soft leather. “I waited for Nigel to return to me for twenty-six years. What's a little longer?” Will's chest ached as Hannibal smiled. It was the closest to self-deprecating he had ever looked. “I can't help feeling terrible where it concerns you.”

“You're not to blame for any of this.” Will had to look away from him. He couldn't bear the sadness and frustration he was causing Hannibal, causing the whole family.

“All of this bureaucratic nonsense. Everyone's at a standstill. Everyone is frozen in time. We can't go back and we can't move on.” Hannibal shifted his weight and his warm fingertips nudged Will's bandaged wrist. “We all have found ourselves in limbo. You must want to go home, Gabriel.”

“Romania wasn't home for me.” He dared to look once more at Hannibal. Tigers eye gazing back at him. “I never intended on returning to Bucharest.”

However Hannibal chose to take that, it was the truth nonetheless. It was all Will could give. In the ways that he could. The smile that teased Hannibal's mouth was genuine, no longer tinged with sadness. Will's declaration pleased him.

* * * * *

It was an unassuming blog. Sure, it had well over thirty thousand subscribers, even more on other social media sites, but in the grand scheme of things it was obscure. No one would bother looking at it. No one would even think to look at it.

A pretty couple. Traveling the world and sampling food from the bizarre to the fashionable fad. They had fans all over the world. Inviting foodies and gourmands alike to join them on their journey. Their fans enjoyed talking to each other on their message board. Anything and everything. If it had to do with a culinary delight, all the better.

One such avid fan and food enthusiast had been a regular for almost a year. Sometimes they'd pop up to comment on an existing thread. They had some mean recipes to share for fish, fresh or saltwater. Other times it was to begin a discussion, opened to any who wanted to join.

09/04/2013
at 10:25 am
Comment by BelliniNWhiskey

I don't know about anyone else but I get some strange cravings once in awhile. I went meatless once and then another time I wanted nothing but reindeer blood—that shit's addictive! Recently I had a long stretch of wanting sarmale. And now I've finally moved on. It feels like the last 3 weeks I've wanted nothing but cepelinai. If you never had either I recommend them. So, anyone else have any cravings they wanna share?

* * * * *

Will felt like screaming. He had already raised his voice an uncountable amount of times but not quite yet had he reached the levels of maniacal yelling that he could feel building inside him. Looking at himself in the floor-length mirror gave him a headache.

His voice was calm as he looked at Mischa's reflection over his shoulder. “I think for every scrap of clothing you insist on shoving me in that's crushed velvet or suede, I'm going to find a tacky tourist t-shirt to buy.”

Mischa made an interested humming sound as she tickled Katinka on her lap. “Only if you promise to wear them with the crushed velvet blazer.”

Will couldn't help the laugh that surprised out of him as he shrugged said blazer off to throw on the huge “No” pile. “With jeans as well? What is this, the early 2000's?”

Mischa smiled, happy because he was smiling. Will didn't need more clothes, perfectly content to borrow what was already given to him, but Mischa insisted. Another outing. Before he could turn back into a hermit, as she had declared earlier that day. When Will's

argument had almost been that he had only gone out the day before and didn't need to again for at least a few days, he stopped to reconsider. She may have had a point.

He spent the afternoon halfheartedly browsing racks at various boutiques. It wasn't all Mischa's tastes and choosing, though she insisted on some pieces. Katinka seemed to like the change of scenery. The things he picked out for her doubled the things for himself. But he gladly attended to her more. Besides, the tiny jeans and little boots proved too tempting to pass by. Now she was ready to go hiking.

Also, the outing served for another agenda.

Will gave up trying to stop Mischa from buying more awful clothes for him as she handed the young woman at the front of the shop a credit card. He scanned the mildly active street outside, spying a cafe across the way. A few people here and there strolled up and down the well-kept streets. It was a pretty day, in an overcast kind of way. At least there was no rain and sleet. When Mischa was ready, Will took all their bags from the polished counter, leaving her to keep hold of Katinka.

“If you give me the keys, I'll take these to the car. Wanna grab lunch over there?”

Mischa looked to where he was gesturing and smiled, pleasantly surprised that he wasn't demanding to return home as soon as possible. “Of course. I would never hear the end of it, anyway, if Hannibal thought I didn't feed you so you can take your pills.”

“No, we wouldn't want to derail all of the good doctor's careful planning. Go on ahead and order for me, please?”

“Very well. Thank you, Gabriel.” Mischa leaned in to give Will the kiss to his cheek he had come to expect, pecking hers in return.

He held the door open for her and they parted ways on the sidewalk. Will took his time, barely a limp to his stride now. It pleased him to find himself not at all fatigued as his arms held the weight of Mischa's sizable purchases. Perhaps there was something to resting and eating the protein-rich meals Hannibal insisted on serving him. The bags were deposited safely in the trunk but Will turned down the corner instead of heading back the way he came.

A few steps into the alley and Will swiveled, grabbing the man behind him and shoving him against the wall. Careful of his right hand, Will used his left arm to press a potential threat to the stranger's throat. He wasn't hurting him, just enough pressure to keep him in place and stop him from struggling. The man seemed to realize there was only restraint and no further incoming violence. Yet. Will didn't need to do that just yet. He immediately took in his appearance, positive this was the man who approached Robertus and Mischa.

“Why are you following me?” He had all day. Here and there as Mischa pulled him along. Never approaching and not at all careful enough that Will didn't notice.

“Where's Gabi?” His voice was a lot deeper than his young looks would suggest, stern and unshakable in his righteousness.

That took Will by surprise. He considered the man in a new light, backing away to show he was willing to have a civil conversation. Whoever he was, he didn't work for Mason. “Who are you?”

He looked like he wanted to put up a fight, demand answers, before the fire went out of him and he slumped against the building hiding them from the street. “Charlie. You're one of *them*. Nigel's family, right?”

“Yes.” Sure. Why not? If it got him what he wanted, absolutely.

“Where's Gabi?” Charlie seemed manic, at the end of his nerves and control, voice shaking with unshed tears.

Well, shit. Will sighed and wished so very much for a tumbler of whiskey at that moment. “Have you not been around anywhere where there's a news channel on? Paper? Internet?”

“I don't speak or read Lithuanian, asshole. Where are you fucks keeping her?”

“I'm sorry to tell you, but there was a train going from Bucharest to Vilnius a few weeks ago —”

“I don't give a shit. Just tell me—”

“The train crashed. She's dead, Charlie. They're both dead. Her and Nigel.”

“What?” But he wasn't seeing Will anymore. Seeing or hearing anything around him, far away. “No. No, that can't be true. There wasn't a train. She wasn't on a train.” The control over his emotions finally broke, exhaustion and shock allowing a flowing stream of tears to fall from doe eyes.

Will took hold of him as he tried to stumble to the sidewalk. “She was. I was there. I'm sorry.” He didn't know who this man was but his grief and dismay were leaving a heavy, slick mess writhing in Will's gut.

“This wasn't supposed to happen. It wasn't supposed to end this way.”

Will watched as he sobbed, listened to his hushed ranting. The man was heartbroken. “What, exactly, was supposed to happen?” When Charlie only looked at him, tears pouring down scruffy cheeks, Will stepped closer. “Why are you in Lithuania, Charlie?”

“We were in love.”

“You and Gabi.” How interesting. Terribly inconvenient for Will, but interesting. “How did you two know each other?”

“I was an American transfer to the same orchestra she was in. Her father mentored me. We got close. Closer after Victor died...It was Fate. And she loved me too.”

“She had an affair with you?”

Charlie shook his head, grimacing at the memory. “She didn't want Nigel anymore. She *didn't*. They were nothing alike, and I showed her what it could be like. What she could have. But then Nigel found out. The greasy fucking prick talked her out of leaving. I didn't see her for over a year. She quit the orchestra. Quit being herself. And then I saw her one day. Pregnant. I told her I still loved her, begged her to leave with me. Right then.” Charlie's tears began anew. “She almost did, but then got scared. She promised me.”

“Promised what?”

“She said after she had the baby, she would leave with me. She promised. But then she had it and I didn't hear from her. Finally, a month ago, she came to my apartment. She gave me a plane ticket. Told me she'd find me in Lithuania...” He sniffled, scrubbing at his eyes. Suddenly, he quieted and looked Will over. “That's her baby. The one you've been carrying around all day.”

Will was almost impressed by the accusation in his voice. “Gabi and Nigel's daughter, yes.”

“That woman knows Nigel. She can tell me more about what happened to Gabi.”

Will caught Charlie as he tried to rush away once more, strong grip on his biceps but not in an aggressive way. He needed Charlie calm. Whatever happened between him and Gabi, Will didn't really care. It wasn't his business and he wouldn't condemn either of them for their feelings. He wasn't that kind of an asshole to someone grieving the loss of their loved one. But it didn't change the fact that he needed Charlie gone and not causing further trouble to the Lecters. Or himself. “Nigel's sister doesn't know much more than what I told you. They haven't even been given Nigel's remains. Please don't make this situation any harder on them.”

That was the wrong thing to say. It gave Charlie a renewed sense of hope, brightening his haggard features. Will could see the appeal. Charlie couldn't be further from Nigel in looks and mannerisms, but he had a boyish charm to him and he was damn persistent. “Then they might not know for sure. Gabi could still be alive. Among the survivors. Did they actually see her body?”

Will was at the end of his patience. He gave him a shake to get his attention back and something in his eyes must have clued Charlie in to the fact that the situation was now teetering on the level of dangerous. Charlie finally seemed to really notice Will's form, scarred and scabbed with scrapes and cuts, bruises and bandages covering the rest of him. “She's gone. Whatever is left of her isn't what you want to remember.” When he looked like he was about to argue, Will stepped closer. Threat hung heavy in the chill around them. “You need to leave. Go back to Romania, Charlie. Or even back to the states. Find a way to be content with the rest of your life. Mourn Gabi, but let her go.”

Will stepped back, made his way to the mouth of the alley. Charlie didn't follow. When Will looked over his shoulder at him, for the last time, the man was a wrecked mess again. But finally aware of the possible situation he had stumbled into. A small smile teased the corner of Will's mouth, barely a shift of his features.

“Don't come near the Lecters again, Charlie.”

Once onto the sidewalk, Will shed the threat and malice that had wrapped around him as cozy as the coat he wore. He crossed the street. Hardly any vehicles around to mar the sleepy charm of the village-turned-tourist spot. Mischa waved at Will through the window of the cafe when she saw him. The smile on his face as he found her and Katinka waiting for him was quite different than the one he left behind in the alley.

Chapter End Notes

Just to let everyone know, Will and Margot are communicating through coded messages on a food blog. Because, as I warned before, I have a dumb sense of humor and the thought of some serious secrets being hidden on a basic couple's long-winded food and travel blog gives me no end of amusement. Also, BelliniNWhiskey is Will's username. Mainly because it's a terrible name to go with a terrible persona who frequents a terrible blog and a shoutout to his character from the terrible crime drama Trial and Retribution. I could not help myself. I have no regrets, either.

I played around a bit with Charlie's background to fit with the dark, rom-com vibe of the overall story. I hope you all are enjoying the story so far. We got more plot development and character interaction. Hannibal doing his thing that he does so well in the background of it all. Thanks again for stopping by and giving this story a chance!

If you're interested, you're welcome to visit me on my tumblr! Feel free to stop by. I'm a nerd there too! :D

Chapter Five

Chapter Notes

> I am actually quite pleased with this chapter. Lots of development that I had tons of fun writing. More hints and insight into Will's past. More peeks into Hannibal...Thanks so much to Pia_Pia, ArchangelDemon, Greehatah and ropaola for taking the time to leave me a comment and let me know what you think and what you're enjoying of the story so far. I hope everyone who passes by enjoys the next installment! Also, if you're reading this while you bide your time in quarantine, I hope you're safe and well, or taking the time to heal and rest.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Five

Two full days came and went since Will met Charlie. Not a sight nor sound from the man in that time. No more depressing stalking around town. No more gate-crashing. Hopefully, Charlie took his warning to heart and left the country. It would be the best thing for him. The smartest choice. Nothing but more pain would find Charlie if he remained in Lithuania to pester the Lecter family. Will would see to it personally.

Night was deep upon them. Soft lamplight and the fireplace cast the main sitting room in a glow that lent the atmosphere a dreamlike quality. Mischa took her leave hours before to places Will didn't ask after. In and out of her family's life like the light flurries swirling outside. Robertus retired after sharing a brandy with Will over a game of chess. Murasaki, doting and energetic woman that she was, took Katinka from Will after dinner. She was probably still with her in Katinka's room, rocking her in the polished mahogany chair and singing one of the haunting lullabies Will heard from her whenever she had the baby in her arms.

Will had stayed behind, sipping his drink and losing himself in thought while a beautiful melody played all the while. He stood to refill his glass, pouring another to take with him across the room. Hannibal paused in his playing of the intricately carved harpsichord, smiling as he took the offered drink.

“Thank you.”

“May I join you?”

Hannibal considered him as he sipped, well aware that there were countless empty chairs and sofas around the room. Nevertheless, he slid over on the leather bench. Once Will sat, he continued to play. A sheaf of music lay propped over the harpsichord. Here and there were

revisions over the existing notes. Will smiled as he looked over the changes, small elegant script in the margins.

Hannibal spoke lightly over the thrumming keys. “Your wrist is healing well. Soon it will only be an aching memory. Will you pick up your bow again, Gabriel?”

“She's an angel on the strings.” Nigel's praise echoed through Will's mind and he took another sip as he considered his answer. “No. I don't think so.”

Hannibal glanced over, intrigued. “Do you fear your skill has atrophied? Sadly, that is always a chance, especially after suffering from injury, but your craft is a muscle like any other. It can be worked back into shape.”

“It's not that. The cello is like so many other details of my life that I'm going to leave behind in Romania.”

“Starting over fresh.”

“Yes.”

“Will you be musically-inclined in this life, as well? Or are you dedicating your discipline to some other skill set?”

“Do you have any suggestions?”

Hannibal smiled, firelight playing with the red undertones of his eyes and the amber highlights of his hair. “Your game with Robertus was a draw. Not many can say they have managed the same.”

“You can. You've beaten him on occasion.”

“On occasion.” Hannibal reached for his glass, savoring the liquor for a moment before swallowing. “Connections come quick for you. Your mind is a vast and vivid realm.”

“You're observant.”

“So are you. I feel you are suited for something else. As creative and imaginative as you are, you are called to something more physical.”

“Why not something physically creative? Creative in my execution of the physical?” A pleasant flush was warming his cheeks and beneath his collar. The brandy tickled through his veins. He hadn't felt like this in over a year. Longer. The word “playful” flitted through his head. “Can't I have layers, Hannibal? Like a surgeon, who treats every aspect of his life as a chance to surround himself in the elegant and beautiful—from the theatrical meals he prepares to the enchanting music he composes?”

Hannibal turned towards him, appraising and appreciative as he looked over Will's healing face. “You can have as many as you allow yourself to have.”

“That's good to know.” Will finished his drink and set the glass beside Hannibal's, laying his left hand over the smooth keys of the harpsichord. “Because I have many skill sets.” Without pause, he played the first seven notes of *Mary Had a Little Lamb*. Entirely too pleased with himself. He learned that song in First Grade.

Genuine pleasure flooded Hannibal's features and he leaned in to play the last of the verse. *It's fleece was white as snow*.

* * * * *

“You're not due back at the hospital for another couple days, yes,” Mischa asked Hannibal while they all sat around the table for dinner.

Hannibal swallowed his bite, chasing it with some wine. “You know very well my schedule. Just tell me what you want.” It wasn't said with any heat. Merely a brother used to numerous demands of a younger sister.

Mischa smiled and gave up any pretense of lone curiosity. “I want you to take Gabriel and Katinka out tomorrow.”

Will looked up at that, ignoring for the moment his own plate. Hannibal had been especially proud of the evening's course: slow-roasted lamb shank in a red wine sauce, served over a bed of fluffy Basmati rice. It fell off the substantial bone in its center, dripping with red wine and broth that enhanced the taste of the large slices of carrots and mushrooms that roasted with it. But even the succulent meat wasn't enough to keep Will's attention any longer.

Hannibal looked from Mischa to Will as he took another bite. “Perhaps you should ask Gabriel first if he wants to join me.”

Before Will could respond, Mischa continued, “He'll stay cooped up all the time, if it's up to him. It'd be nice to show him more sights. Him and Katinka.”

Hannibal just looked at Will, offering nothing except amusement. Will asked, “You're going somewhere,” for lack of anything else to say with the rest of the table watching him.

“Just running errands for this weekend. I am hosting a dinner party here.”

“I wouldn't want to impose.”

“You wouldn't be, however, the choice is yours.” Hannibal took his time cutting into his lamb. “You and Katinka are more than welcome to join me.”

Will glanced around. The rest of the Lecters waited for his decision, smiling in encouragement. They wanted so much to include him in things. And if they accomplished he and Hannibal spending time together, all the better. Hannibal didn't keep his suspicious questioning to himself. The strange, guarded, camaraderie they seemed to be developing was obvious to any who watched them interact. Maybe it was because of Nigel that his family wanted Will and his twin to find some kind of common ground. Will, for all his gifts of understanding, didn't want to examine too closely the motives of the Lecter family, feeling

already like an intruder. He took a sip of his own glass of wine—just a little to enjoy with his meal. At his doctor's allowance. “All right. I'd like that.”

“Excellent. We'll leave after breakfast.” Hannibal smiled, happy with the new plan for his day. “Dress warmly.”

* * * * *

Hannibal, Will was learning, was a man of refined tastes with the means and know-how to get exactly what he wanted. The morning spent in his company was oddly fascinating for it all really just being a long grocery-shopping event. Now it was a little after noon. Already finished with four stores, they were in their fifth destination. Will hadn't bothered yet with the stroller Hannibal had loaded into the trunk of his car before they set out. Instead, he wandered the shop with Katinka propped against his chest.

She looked about, eyes wide and catching on all the colors around them, excitedly sucking on her pacifier. They were at a florist. For the last few minutes, Hannibal had been talking with a woman he seemed familiar with about what Will assumed to be arrangements and centerpieces. Hannibal would murmur something in that lilting way of his, be shown a delicate bloom that he would smell and touch, before saying something to the florist. Once it looked like Hannibal was examining feathers and small animal skulls, Will wandered away.

Another few minutes and Hannibal found Will at the front. He smiled when he saw how elated it made Katinka when Will tickled her plump cheek with a petal from one of the silk flowers on display. He escorted them to the car, taking Katinka to put into her seat.

“Find everything you needed?” Will couldn't explain why he was so amused by Hannibal's shopping. The perfect host. Entertaining and dazzling those around him. If the man was enjoying himself now, Will couldn't imagine the terror he was with a party in full-swing.

“I did, yes.” He was quite pleased. As he started the car, he glanced to Will. “How are you feeling?”

“Other than my wrist, I'm hardly in any pain. And that's just a little sore.” He still wore the brace for added protection but he hadn't felt the odd bubble-like shifting in his joint for a few days now.

“Then would you care to have lunch with me after the next stop? Last one, I promise.”

Will shrugged to mean that it didn't bother him if Hannibal wasn't finished or not. “That sounds great. Thank you.”

Hannibal pulled away from the florist and started down a series of streets. “Have you enjoyed your time away from home?”

“It's been informative, in more ways than one. Between you and Mischa, I'm starting to get my bearings, get my feel for the surrounding area.”

“I'm sure that was partly why she insisted I bring you. She knows I shop at a variety of places when I plan a dinner party. If nothing else, it's an excellent opportunity for you to explore.”

“I appreciate it.”

They were silent the rest of the drive. Hannibal perfectly content to weave through traffic, sunglasses protecting him from the glare of high afternoon sun, while Will once more committed streets and signs to memory. Slowly the language was sticking in his head. Enough to where he could read road signs. He couldn't help his surprise as the city turned to now familiar dense forest which then thinned to a more coastal landscape. The Bentley glided into a parking spot outside of a small corner shop with gilded script painted on the gleaming windows. From his seat Will could see fresh and cured meats hanging near a butcher's corner, bundles of herbs near the counter and other goods awaiting Hannibal's scrutiny.

A posh little pocket of finery tucked away on a street overlooking a pier. Will looked around as Hannibal tended to Katinka. The sound of waves could be heard from where they were. In the short distance from them, he could see a few boats bobbing with the current.

“Will you need my help carrying anything?”

Hannibal settled Katinka on the crook of his arm, swiftly removing his sunglasses away from grabby little hands. “I shouldn't think so. Why? Are you beginning to hurt?”

“No, nothing like that. I thought I'd take a walk to the docks while you do your thing, if that's all right.”

“Of course. The sea air and the short walk will be good for you.”

“Want me to relieve you of your squirmy burden?” Will chuckled as Hannibal shifted Katinka, patting her bottom as she settled against him.

“Not at all. I've rather enjoyed carting her around today. Broadening her senses and future palate.”

“Escargot in her future, is it?”

“One can only hope. I shudder to think of what she'd consume without my influence.”

Will hummed. “With me in her life she has double cheeseburgers and Diet Cokes to look forward to. Balance out your snails.”

Hannibal didn't bother responding to that, other than turning on his heel and saying, “Go take your walk,” in a crisp and haughty tone.

Will laughed again but set out to do just that. It was a narrow and winding path. Weathered stones led down and around from the street above directly to the docks. There were a few people around, all who had obvious business there. Some were working on their boats, getting ready to take them out, or fishermen taking in their hauls or preparing for the next one. No one paid Will any mind, though. Even dressed in fine slacks and an unblemished peacoat, he carried himself with a familiarity of the surroundings, weaving around large

stacks of crates, equipment and piles of nets. He wasn't a stranger to the sights, smells and work of the docks, no matter where they were.

It was a comfort, being around the water. He could feel the chill rising up from the sea. It brought with it the cloying smell of salt and brine. The water wasn't choppy though. It would make for good sailing and even better fishing. His dad would have appreciated such conditions, back when they used to travel from town to town. Following currents. Following the promise of a good catch. Following the extra money that tinkering with motors and repairing boats would gain. Lost as he was in his past, he didn't notice anyone approaching him. Not even the clack of high heels shook him from the cobwebs of memories. Only when sweet perfume invaded his senses, out of place as it was, did he look up from the swirling water.

When the pretty stranger only stared at him he asked, “Is there a problem?” He hoped speaking English would dissuade them from further interaction, however, she only stepped closer with a growing smile.

“For being 'Number One' on a lot of bad people's lists, you're not very careful about being seen.”

Will turned slowly to face the woman, gloved hand still holding the rail he had been relaxing against. To anyone watching they were just two people having a chat. No one would be able to tell how every muscle in his body was prepared for attack or defense. However, something told him, from the insanely spiked stilettos of her knee-length boots to the vibrantly red ringlets of her hair that were protected from the elements with an audaciously large hat, she wasn't there to collect his bounty. At least, not in the way people usually approached him.

“Who are you?”

“Freddie Lounds. I would shake your hand but something tells me that wouldn't be a good idea.”

“What do you want?”

Freddie smiled again, leaning against the rail. “Well, that's changed a bit since I first started on my little hunt for you. Pretty good job of staying off the radar, by the way.”

“You're a hunter then, Miss Lounds?”

“In a way, you could say I am. This is the first time I've put my skills to this kind of search, though.”

“If you have a point, make it. Otherwise, I need to cut this short.” He made a wide circle around her to leave but her words stopped him mid-step.

“Are the Lecters aware that they took in a wanted criminal, or did you feed them some sob story?” He turned to face her and Freddie chuckled at the look on his face. Most would have backed down, fearing the cold menace that gathered around him like a darkening cloud, however she just smiled even more as if she expected such a reaction. “They have no idea do

they, Mr. Graham? No clue that an unstable, former FBI agent has infiltrated their gilded nest. How did you manage that? I'm not here in any official capacity, by no means, but I still would love to hear all about your rise from seemingly out of nowhere to what looks like the guardian of the late, dashing Nigel Lecter's sole surviving daughter. Triumph out of tragedy. People love that stuff."

It finally clicked into place where he knew her. In his former line of work, he thankfully didn't have to deal with public relations. He left that garbage to those who could stomach it. His smile mirrored hers as he stepped closer. "Why are you here, Miss Lounds? I doubt very much an American tabloid would care enough about my possible existence to send you all the way here on their dime."

She was good, used to being shocked, hardly giving away her surprise that he knew her. "As it happens, someone else is footing my bill. Mason Verger pays very well and is willing to cover whatever costs I have when I show him such promising results."

Instantly, Will's mood plummeted. He was done playing. Whatever enjoyment Lounds seemed to get out of this needed to end. He took hold of her arm and brought them back to the rail, careful of passersby. "Did you tell him where I was? A lot of innocent people died."

Freddie shook his hand off but didn't step away. "I'm not the only one who knew you were in Romania, *Aiden*. In fact, considering what happened, you're lucky I'm the one who found you here."

"And how'd you manage that?"

Freddie shrugged, sliding her hands in her bright red coat as the wind picked up. "It would have taken me a while, possibly without ever getting a lead, but there was a guy raising all sorts of hell at the hospital where survivors of the crash were taken. He knew one of the possible victims. I told him I was looking into the missing, he gave me more information to fit together. Boom. Here you are."

Charlie. Fuck. Will sighed and forced himself to stay calm. "What do you want?" He was tiring of asking.

"I told you: my motivations changed. Now, when I found a bounty on you while searching down other leads, I thought I hit something big. I mean, you happened to sleep your way into one of the most influential, richest, most dangerous dynasties in the United States, are responsible for the disappearance of Margot Verger and brutally attacked her brother before fleeing the country. What was worth more than the story than what Mason will pay for you?"

Will couldn't help sneering. "Imagine. Never having to write another shitty fluff piece ever again. You'd be set for life, Freddie."

"My thoughts exactly. Except now, you once again attached yourself to money and power. I'm impressed, Will."

"Must be my good looks."

“It's definitely not your personality.” She smiled at his scowling face, laughing before he could get another word in. “God, what I wouldn't do to get an exclusive interview from you! Everything you've done, in less than a year, and wound up with a *Lecter* when he died. Does his family know who you really are? Does that bombshell artist or gorgeous doctor have any idea who they're doting on, letting care for that poor, defenseless baby?”

Will shuttered away everything that he already hadn't shown her. He was still annoyed, he wouldn't and couldn't hide that, but a familiar type of calm began to trickle along his nerves. It wasn't impossible to find information on a family that was obviously powerful and famous, especially for someone like Freddie, but she knew more about the Lecters than he liked. About Mischa and Hannibal. About Katinka.

He mirrored her again, sliding his hands in his pockets and leaned on the rail to put him closer. “You don't give a shit about them, or their safety. If you did, you would have already went to them with what you know. Or the police. Or Mason.” Let her think he didn't either. Let her think they were just a potential meat shield. She was wrong about most everything else, what were a few more details?

“What can I say? I'm a very cautious opportunist.”

“And you smell an opportunity.”

Freddie's eyes narrowed as she took him in, playful smirk curving her glossy lips. “I haven't decided what all this is.” She backed away a few steps before twirling about to sashay down the weathered dock. “Don't leave town, Will. It wouldn't be good for anyone you've involved.”

She found him once. She would find him again. When she was ready to make her move. Unspoken but clear. Will turned back to the water. Swirls of foam as intricate and interlocking as his thoughts. The line of his body was relaxed and still as any other time he prepared for the long wait after sinking his lure in whatever water he found himself fishing. Inside, a cold and magnificent rage was being nurtured and fed deep in his heart, his soul.

Freddie had yet to tell her employer where he was. Mason was impulsive and never quite grew out of the need for instant gratification of his spoiled childhood. No. If Mason had his whereabouts finally pinned down, Will would have known. The crazy son of a bitch wouldn't have been able to help himself. It didn't sound like Freddie had any idea of where Margot was. Hell, it sounded like Freddie assumed he killed her. She didn't seem to know about the baby. For such a clever woman, she had so many details wrong. Or she didn't really give a shit where Margot was or why she disappeared. All of her effort was focused on Will. Her interest on his connection to the Lecters.

Will took a lungful of cold air, the smell of fish and seaweed comforting. Mason was not a priority at the moment. However, Will was known. By two people. Charlie knew he wasn't Gabi, and it was only a matter of time before he learned the man caring for Gabriela's baby went by Gabriel. Nothing would stop him from blowing Will's cover then. Will understood he was grieving. Sad and angry. A liability. A danger to everyone involved and Will would not allow misplaced emotions to jeopardize himself, Margot, their unborn baby or the family that had taken him in.

In his quest for answers and a love that was no longer possible, if it ever was, Charlie had led incredible peril to them all.

A perfect set of circumstances and chance. Freddie saw her advantage and took it. No more caring for Charlie's situation than anyone else' except her own. She wasn't going to tell Mason any time soon that she essentially finished the job he was paying handsomely for. Something about the Lecters, and Will's relationship with them, piqued her curiosity. Her desire to push for more. It gave Will his own advantage. Nothing else was in him but his own idea of righteousness screaming for him to press it. Use everything he could to neutralize the threat she represented. The other problem was complicated. He sympathized with Charlie, truly, but he would push his own advantage against him, as well. If he had to.

Will had a feeling he would have to.

The acceptance made the icy fury inside him expand. A decisive calm rushing through him. Charlie didn't seem to have anything outside of his love for Gabi. A hyper-fixation that left room for nothing else. He came all the way to another country, with nothing but instructions on more waiting from a married mother he loved beyond sense and reason. Dropped everything. No work, friends or family he would answer to or explain his reasons. An American lost in the throngs of a foreign country.

Freddie most definitely hadn't told her tabloid office what she was up to. Last he checked, helping to gain the bounty off someone's head was not something one did in any kind of official capacity. She was off the grid as much as he was, using her real name in introductions to shock and intimidate. Nothing would tie her to him, or Mason, if one looked only on the surface. Strings of aliases and dummy accounts to provide what she needed and discarded immediately after use. No one outside of the shadows looking for her.

It would be easy. Obliterating the two things that put all of his hard work and time on the very real cusp of being for nothing. Will would not let that happen. He sacrificed too much for it all to be wasted effort. Regardless of what he would have to do, or all the consequences that followed. They were a price he would readily pay.

Shrieking laughter only a child could make with innocent abandon carried to him over the sound of waves. Hannibal was at the top of the path, dark cerulean suit a gem-colored beacon against the gray of the day. The bright orange of his shirt clearly visible even from the distance. Katinka was still in his arms, laughing and pointing at the squawking birds swooping low above her. Will waved, knowing Hannibal was watching him, before making his way back up to them.

It would be so easy.

Hannibal stepped back as he cleared his ascent, taking in Katinka's excited gurgling as she saw Will and reached for him, with curiosity in his sharp gaze. Anticipatory curiosity. Will chuckled and took Katinka from him as Hannibal was already lifting her out to him. He kissed her cheek that was half hidden by the hood of her flannel coat. Her skin was cool from the wind but she didn't seem to be suffering from the biting weather.

“Get everything you need,” Will asked as they wandered back to the car.

“Yes, thank you. This day was entirely more fruitful than I thought to expect.”

On their way to a restaurant Hannibal assured him he would enjoy, Will reflected on the new problems sprouting up all around him. It wouldn't take much to raze them.

* * * * *

The next morning, after breakfast and his routine check of message boards and any activity he could find on Mason and now Freddie Lounds, Will walked the ground floor with Katinka. She liked being taken around the house after feeding. A little burp was muffled against his covered shoulder and he smiled as he continued patting her back. Other than her soft cooing and his amused encouragement, the bottom floor was silent.

Mischa left after dinner the evening before. Off to finalize a gallery showing in Japan. Murasaki went with her, though she didn't leave until she gave Katinka several kisses and a hug to Will. There was no hint of Hannibal at the estate. He wasn't at breakfast, something Will came to expect. It wasn't to return to work. That wouldn't be for another few days. Taking care of last minute touches before his party, no doubt.

Soft tread on the staircase reminded Will he wasn't entirely alone. He turned just as Robertus came to the landing, both smiling when they spied each other. “Good morning, Robertus.”

“Good morning.” Robertus waved him over, smile growing ever fuller. “I'm glad I caught you. Are you busy?”

“No, sir. Just finishing Tinker Bell's morning ritual. Hopefully, with no puke down my back today.”

Robertus laughed, always tickled that Will couldn't break the habit of calling him something so formal. He motioned towards the stairs. “If you would come with me, please, Gabriel.”

“Should I put Katinka in her crib?”

“No, I'd like to have her with us while we conduct business.”

“Business?”

Nothing more was said. Just a smile. Excitement and satisfaction in vibrant eyes. They cleared the second floor with the climbing staircase. Will had never been to the third floor, afraid to intrude and content with the space already given him. It was just as large and sprawling as the rest of the castle. Completely different in shade and taste, however. Everything was light and breezy. Not too many heirloom pieces and antiques. Aside from the set of armor in a display at the end of the hall. Japanese. Old. Used at one point. Definitely not a replica.

They came to a door at the opposite end of the hall and Robertus took them into his office. Everything in its place. No spills of books and papers. The computer was off. Soft music played from a compact speaker with Robertus' phone secure in its dock. He indicated the chair he wanted Will to take while he grabbed a glossy dossier from his desk. He exchanged

his bundle for Will's. As Robertus played with his sleepy grandniece, Will read over the papers he was given. Dread began to thrash about his stomach until he had to look away from the official, legally-binding, words or else risk being sick.

Robertus noticed his trembling, concern coloring his face and voice. “What's wrong, Gabriel? Are you feeling unwell?”

“It's not that.” Will held up the folder instead of speaking further. Such an unassuming thing, yet enough to unravel his composure.

“I thought you'd be happy to once more have identification. Some of your worries taken care of.”

“I can't accept this.”

Robertus' concerned frown gave way to shock. “Why ever not?

It took Will a moment to get his thoughts together, his voice to work properly. Stuttering and starting and stopping before finally taking in a deep breath. “I'm not a Lecter. I never was. Never could be.” *Gabriel Lecter*. The name screamed out at him from every page. This person he pretended to be. This impostor who took over the life of a dead woman. The doppelganger who was slowly taking him over.

“Nonsense. You are family, Gabriel. The tragedy that befell you doesn't change that.”

“Robertus—”

“The tragedy of an ignorant country doesn't change that. I simply took the opportunity to right a ridiculous wrong.” He smiled, too charming for Will's defenses. “Not many refuse me. It was nothing but an honor to make sure your new identification papers reflected what has been, and shall always be, your place with us.”

Will shook his head, opening the folder again to find the other reason for his distress. He held up the checks nestled near the back of the documents. Crisp and new. Elegant script in English and Lithuanian. Gabriel Lecter's name on all of them in bold ink. Access to the Lecter fortune. Accompanied with papers detailing codes and passwords, locations of deposit boxes and safes. He waved the offending things at Robertus, who had the nerve to keep kissing on Katinka and watch Will as if waiting for a child to finish their tantrum. Unconcerned. Terribly amused. Uncannily similar to Hannibal.

“I can't accept this, Robertus. I won't.”

“Won't you? Why not?”

“You all have been far too generous to me, as it is. I couldn't possibly take more kindness from you. I have no right to even consider something like this, let alone accept it.”

“You have every right. And this is not a completely selfless act I am undertaking.” Robertus sighed and came closer, sitting on the edge of his desk as he looked over Will's form. “Murasaki and I never had children of our own. Not biological. We tried to be good parents

to my brother's children, when they were sent here. I tried to do right by them. Give them everything they could need or want. Loved them when their parents no longer could. But something drove Nigel away. I was too late to be there for him, but if you allowed it, I would like very much to make amends. Through you and Katinka."

Will was floored by his words. The love and sorrow he felt rippling off Robertus made him want nothing more than to agree to anything that might lessen such pain. "I never took Nigel's name." It was weak and didn't stand a chance as an argument against someone like Robertus.

"What name did you take, standing beside our Nigel?"

On a whim Will said, "Smith."

"Our name suits you better," Robertus said. He leaned down, smoothing Will's hair back and laid his lips on the crown of his head. Paternal and gentle and almost Will's undoing. "You're our family, Gabriel. You and Katinka, together. We won't have one without the other."

Chapter End Notes

I've been excitedly waiting to get to the exchange with Will and Robertus. It always seemed so sad to me, the idea of giving Will proof that he's a Lecter to them. Especially since Will has such mixed feelings about this whole ordeal. Also, more threats. Because we can't have a story about Will Graham if he's not under multiple threats. :D I hope you all enjoyed this update. This is still super fun to write. I haven't enjoyed writing something like this in a long time. Thanks for joining me and I hope you come back!

~CReed

Chapter Six

Chapter Notes

> I am quite fond of this chapter. I know I say that about most chapters, but it's true. Big thanks to Sabi, Pia_Pia, Greehatah, AGlassRoseNeverFades, 221BookLord, StorybookLover and Sosaith for taking the time to leave me such lovely comments. I am really happy to hear you all are enjoying the story. I like hearing what you think, too. Like I said before, talking about writing and stories is my jam. If you ever want to slip me some lines, feel free. I hope you enjoy this next installment. As we continue to navigate through this rather strange time we find ourselves in, I hope I am helping you pass the time. Be safe and healthy, dear readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Six

Will was encouraged, enticed and expected in equal measure from different members of the Lecter family to attend the party occurring that evening. Tried as he dared, it was impossible to refuse. He hid for as long as could, wandering the woods and becoming absorbed in his work, but Mischa finally came to collect him. She shoved him towards the bathroom and went to look through his clothes. When he emerged from the shower in a billow of steam, there was a new electric razor on the counter waiting for him. Taking the hint, he shaved weeks' worth of a thick beard from his face and neck. The lotion he applied after was subtly scented and didn't irritate any lingering cuts in the slightest.

Not that there were many left. Will studied the revealed skin and found a small, faint bruise darkening his jawline and a scratch so shallow one would have to be really close and rudely staring to notice. His hair had grown long enough that the curls hid the cut on his forehead. He just wouldn't slick it back. A huff of laughter escaped him as he slid a pair of black slacks on and tucked the tails of his burnt orange silk shirt in. There was no reason to be so concerned with his appearance. This was all Hannibal's show. No one was around for Will to impress.

That didn't stop him from brushing his hair to the side *just so* or using a splash or two of the cologne that found its way among his possessions.

He gathered Katinka up from the changing table and placed a kiss to the top of her head. The fluffy, puffy dress she wore swallowed her up and he straightened her headband as she played with the frills of her skirt. Her hair was getting longer. Changing color. Lightening in the last few weeks. Fine, sandy-blond strands that curled around her ears.

“You gonna be my shield tonight, Tinker Bell? Distract everyone with your cuteness so they forget to talk to me?” She shrieked and giggled as he mouthed at her chubby neck. Her scent

of lavender and milk calmed the last bit of anxiety he had.

His door opened and he went to greet Mischa, returned to make him socialize. He smiled as he took in Mischa's form. Another suit. Green and gold brocade. The jacket cinched her waist to flare out at her hips and cascade down to her knees. Pants snug as a snake's skin. A soft curling wave to her hair, pinned back by emerald, gold and jade clips that sparkled with every movement.

“You look stunning,” he told her.

“Thank you. As do you. Both of you.” Mischa gave Katinka's hand a squeeze before she patted Will's smooth cheek. “Beautiful boy. No wonder you hide behind scruff. I can hardly take you seriously, now.”

Mischa slipped her hand in the crook of his elbow and pulled him out of the safety of his room. From the stairs he could hear piano music and chatter coming from a few rooms. Hired staff smiled as they past, trays of drinks and hors d'oeuvres at the ready. Will politely shook his head at the offered refreshments and held Katinka closer.

Mischa pressed a hand to his lower back, leading him towards the dining room. “Dinner is about to start. I was told to make sure you got to your seat before the room filled.”

“We have assigned seats?”

“Of course.” Of course.

As they entered the dining room, Hannibal came from the kitchen slipping his jacket on. Black with a pale floral silk jacquard. Black shirt. Black tie. Black slacks tailored to fit. That one trace of color against varying degrees of black. His hair was slicked back and when he leaned in to take Katinka, Will could smell the smoky, earthy hint of his cologne.

“Thank you for joining us, Gabriel. And for bringing Katinka.” Hannibal kissed her head as she leaned against his chest, blue eyes wide as she took in the flowers and baubles decorating the table.

Will smiled, hoping it didn't look as much as it felt like a grimace. “Can't exactly fake an excuse not to come. You know where I live.”

Hannibal smiled and let Mischa take Katinka. When Will frowned and took an involuntary step towards them, she was quick to reassure. “I'm just taking her to play while we all have dinner. You can have her back as soon as we're finished, I promise.”

Damn. There went his cover. Hannibal showed Will his seat, to the right at the head of the table. A look on his face like he knew what Will had planned and not so secretly delighted in thwarting his plot. Not a second after Will pulled his chair in and accepted a glass of champagne did the rest of Hannibal's guests make their way into the room. Hannibal showed Murasaki to her seat across from Will and shook Robertus' hand before he claimed the seat beside her.

Robertus took hold of Hannibal before he could step away, bringing him into a hug. He whispered something in Lithuanian to Hannibal and whatever it was caused him to smile. Not a micro-expression. Not a concealed twitch of amusement. A stretch of full, pale lips. The flash of sharp teeth. Dangerous and striking and yet, Will had never seen him look so boyish, so touchable. Hannibal was even more pleased with himself, greeting and seating those invited to his table.

“You look well, Gabriel.” Murasaki's voice drifted over the chatter of their guests and broke Will of his staring. “It soothes my heart to see you so rested and healed.”

“Thank you, Murasaki. I've had lots of help.” He smiled at her and Robertus.

The older couple lit up the room to Will. Aside from Mischa, and even Hannibal's dramatic ensemble, everyone else was drab in comparison. While the guests looked refined and fancy, they were simply answering a call to a formal event. Murasaki looked like she stepped out of a watercolor. Varying shades of blue silk flowed around her and accentuated her curves. Black hair piled high to fall in delicate curls about creamy shoulders. Silver and sapphire shimmered from her ears and throat. Pale and dark all at once. A goddess of moonlight.

At her side, doting and still so enamored of his wife, lounged Robertus. A mysterious cat. A sphinx watching over the proceedings of man with an amused glitter to his hooded eyes. His turquoise tuxedo shimmered in the candlelight. Two royal blue butterflies in repose amongst the lesser creatures surrounding them. Timeless. Unknowable and unreachable. And they both looked at Will like they looked at Hannibal. Like how a smile came to them whenever they found Katinka in the room with them. Like Mischa, when she finally returned and Robertus stood to kiss her hand and pull out her chair beside him.

Was this what family could feel like?

It took Will's breath away and he gulped down some of his drink. Thankfully, the last of his guests arrived and Hannibal stood at the head of the table, tapping his crystal flute and saving Will from thinking further. Everyone grew quiet, turning their attention to their host.

“Thank you all for joining me tonight. I know there was some confusion and aggravation in rescheduling everyone's busy lives. Your understanding and patience, as well as your continued support, are greatly appreciated by myself, and my family, during this dark time. A little over a year ago, I decided to begin the task of arranging my retirement. Due to unforeseen and tragic circumstances, I had to put final arrangements on hold for a while. However, I am happy to announce I am now, officially, a former colleague to most of you tonight.” As a round of good-natured laughter rose up from the table, Hannibal raised his glass to them all. “Former colleague but still a friend. May we continue to meet for joyous occasions and leave our sorrows behind us.”

There came applause that Will slowly joined in for. It became even more jovial, fading to excited chatter as hired staff brought out the first of several courses. Conversation never waned. As steady as the flow of drinks and food. Will kept to himself, talking quietly with Murasaki and Robertus. Mischa was busy accepting praise and flirtations from a few men near her. The evening was to feature a twelve-course meal. They were only just beginning the first main course. The seventh course. Will found it all to be almost overwhelming. If it

wasn't for Hannibal. He would explain every change of course, happy to talk Will through exactly what he was putting in his mouth.

A server set a plate before Will and Hannibal leaned close. “Roasted bone marrow and grilled scallops with lemon-ginger butter, accompanied by a parsley salad and grilled baguettes.”

Will scooped some of the marrow onto a crusty baguette, nibbling to test the strange bite. He couldn't help smiling as the smooth marrow melted on his tongue with a complex and comforting flavor. Hannibal watched, waiting to hear his verdict. “It's not often I have the opportunity to eat marrow. I forgot how delicious it can be.”

Hannibal smiled and prepared his own baguette. “Sadly, bones and marrow are often discarded. Over the years, I have perfected the ways to use every bit of the animals I choose for slaughter.”

Will glanced at his plate. The beautiful arrangement of meat from the land and sea. “One of your recipes? I assumed you had your party catered.”

He chuckled after he swallowed a bite. “No, I would never do that. I always insist on cooking repeatedly with the sous chef before a party.” At Will's look he insisted, “I have to explain my recipes, make sure they are completely understood, before I let anyone take control of my kitchen.”

Will couldn't help laughing into his glass, hiding his smile. “Perfectionists are often control freaks.” Hannibal returned his smile, not denying the implication, and refreshed Will's champagne.

A voice rose up from further down the table. Hannibal's easy humor and charm evaporated. His eyes slid from Will's face to the man who Will guessed was talking to him. A subtle change. Unrecognizable to most. Will felt it like a cool breeze coming from a window that was suddenly slammed shut.

“Repeat yourself in English, please.” When the man stopped talking, confusion clouding his handsome features, Hannibal said, “I explained to everyone earlier that my brother-in-law is not yet fluent in our language. It would be rude of us to leave him out of conversation. Would it not, Kasparas?”

Kasparas gathered his wits quickly. A cool politeness took the place of his confusion. “Forgive me,” he said to Will. Looking back at Hannibal, a small smirk began to curve his slender mouth as he looked between him and Will. “I forgot your *brother-in-law* is staying with you. It is good that he is finding comfort in you, in his time of loss.”

“We can all only try,” Hannibal said.

“If you are making accommodations, even more than prohibiting certain languages from upsetting his little ears, then I'd say you're well on your way to pleasing him however you can, Hannibal.” He waved the conversation over as he sipped his champagne. “Anyway, I was only asking, now that you have retired and handed over the mantle, what your plans are?

Gardening? Golfing? Lovers half your age?" Light laughter rose up from those listening, unaware of the poisonous thorns hidden beneath the friendly words of both men.

"I doubt I would have time for such trifles, even if I wanted them. I assure you, I will be quite busy. Hospital or no." Hannibal sliced into one of the large scallops on his plate, taking the time to gather some of the sauce and salad for the piece of shellfish.

"What with?" Kasparas urged, lips glistening from the champagne and smile sharp. "You've been awfully secretive these past months."

"After I finish transitioning from my medical practice, I am going to pursue one in psychiatry."

"Really?" No longer caring what the man down the table was after, Will turned his attention once more to Hannibal. He couldn't help showing his happy interest at Hannibal's chosen field being so closely aligned with his own.

"Does the subject interest you—Gabriel, is it?" Kasparas piped back up, declining the offer of a second helping from the staff making their rounds.

"Yes," Will said.

"A strange hobby for a lounge singer, but then, we all have our things."

"Cellist," Hannibal and Will said at the same time. It was more to Will than anyone else when he continued, "The mind has always interested me. Some wounds cannot be healed by scalpels and stitches. Sometimes, it takes a lot more. And I doubt there will be a risk of anyone dying from my therapy."

Will smiled, setting his glass against Hannibal's when he offered a toast. The staff came to clear their dishes. With a sigh, Will prepared for more verbal landmines and decadent food.

As the dishes for the last course were taken, Will made a break for it. Mischa and Hannibal didn't care or notice, too involved in acting the perfect host and hostess to keep a constant eye on him. He slipped away to the quiet and comfort of one of the smaller studies on the ground floor. Will kept from pacing, wondering when the appropriate time to call it a night was. He tried not to fidget but couldn't help it as his arms were noticeably empty.

His baby had been stolen. And he couldn't do anything about it because it was Robertus and Murasaki who made off with her. It seemed they all had the same idea: using Katinka as distraction and excuse both to keep people at bay. Although, Robertus and Murasaki were enjoying parading her around far more than he would. Fine. He'd let them have their fun. The second she started crying though, that'd be his chance to retire for the rest of the evening.

He hardly felt guilty hoping to hear her fussing.

The door opened and the sounds of the party rose and faded as it clicked shut once more. Will turned from the window he had been staring out of to find Hannibal coming to him, a glass in

each hand. He lifted one out for Will to take. Held to the light, Will could barely see through the cloudy green liquid. He took a sip when Hannibal did.

“Chartreuse. The blend of herbs and spices in the liqueur should help you digest such a large meal as the one you just forced yourself through.” Hannibal smiled, knowing how torturous the evening had been for him and not at all apologetic for making him attend.

Will savored the strange spirit, licking the sweetness from his bottom lip and enjoying the pungent aftertaste that coated the back of his throat. “Shouldn't you be entertaining your guests?”

“Is that not what I'm doing?” Hannibal took another sip and leaned on the sill. “I'd rather make sure your needs are being seen to than suffer through more boringly polite conversation with the mindless rabble currently fluttering through my house.”

Will laughed, eyeing him as he downed the rest of his drink. “You had to invite most of them, didn't you?”

“For appearances sake, yes. Fortunately, they are a handful of people I won't have to bother with after tonight.”

“Oh? No connections to keep well-oiled for business purposes?”

“None that I need.” He sighed. “I suppose I can keep in distant contact. Christmas card contact.”

“How generous of you. I'm sure Kasparas will wait every year by his mailbox with bated breath for your kind well-wishes.” He laughed at the twitch that rippled over Hannibal's face. Still too polite and refined to loosen his tongue. “What's his problem, anyway?”

Hannibal turned and took Will's empty glass to put both on the window. “I noticed you didn't wear your splint tonight. You made it through dinner without any hint of pain. Not from your injuries, anyway.” He took up Will's hand and began a careful examination of it, bending his wrist in a series of range of motion exercises, as he continued their conversation. “Kasparas is the young, brilliant doctor who will be taking over the majority of my duties.”

“So, I'm your last patient?” Will counted in his head the seconds Hannibal stretched his wrist back before relaxing the joint, repeating the process.

Hannibal smiled, a trace of teeth hidden within the smirk. “Officially, yes. Remind me to bill you.”

Will watched him, the conversation from dinner echoing through his mind. The ghosts of words not spoken but felt like a swarm of gnats hovering around them. “You two were close once. Now there's just cruel rivalry.”

If Hannibal was surprised or disturbed by his observation he didn't show it. “Yes, just not in the way he wanted to be, hence the rivalry.”

“What did he want?”

“Me. For a time I wanted the same, but I made a mistake. I thought he was something he's not.” Hannibal shrugged one broad shoulder. Elegant and unfathomable wrapped in black. “He's beautiful and smart, but that could be said about a horse or prized bull. I have no use for just one more decoration. Beautiful and dangerous, but in a banal and predictable way. Not in a way that lasts. Not in a way that cuts deep and deadly, leaving something new and exquisite behind after its destruction.”

Will laughed at his quiet declaration, making a fist and relaxing his hand a few times as instructed. His wrist felt fine, strong. “You want something beautiful that draws blood, that can equally maim as well as love?”

Hannibal smiled and began to roll up Will's sleeve to trace along his veins and explore the last of his healing wounds. “Doesn't everyone?”

* * * * *

10/16/2013
at 11:29 pm
GingerSnapped4351 replied to BelliniNWhiskey's comment

no cravings lately but ive been trying to be more adventerus with things i didnt think id ever try. some werent for me others im surprised I enjoyed. however that wasnt the case when i tried hakarl recently. its disgusting and i dont even know if theres a acquired taste for it. no one seems to like it! i dont reccomend. definitly will be trying something new soon to make up for the grossness.

With the excitement of the last few days, Will hadn't been online to check for any noteworthy activity. Margot finally got a hold of him and just seeing her username on the screen brought him so much relief. He read the note once more. Posted a few days ago, but the most updated he had been on her well-being since they fled their last safe houses. She was fine, as much as she could be. Laying low in Iceland for the moment. Plans to move on at some point. Just to be safe.

All those months ago, before they went their separate ways, they formulated a way to tell one another exactly where they were without saying hardly anything at all. Wherever they were, the other would know once they mentioned the national dish of the country. There was no way in Hell that Margot—pretty princess that he knew she was—actually ate hákarl. But the inclusion of the dish in her post, purposefully littered with spelling and grammatical errors, served its purpose.

As far along as she was, her next move would have to be soon. Especially now that she let Will know she was okay. Iceland. She was so close! It was a comforting realization. They hadn't physically seen each other in a long time, only making contact if absolutely necessary. To think Margot, and the baby, were the closest they had ever been in almost a year heightened the giddiness he could hardly contain. It lifted part of the burden that had weighed on him for so long.

Soon it would be over. Will couldn't imagine his life after. No longer looking over his shoulder. No more keeping everyone at a distance. Back in the sates, in his old life, he never

thought he would crave intimacy like he did. He never minded being on his own. Solitude was comforting, easy. Most of the time it was best if he was alone. But there was a difference in keeping people at arm's length out of personal preference and what he was forced to do in the time since he left home. Being stripped of identity, the possibility of forgetting himself, no one ever knowing who he truly was—that's what took its toll.

A knock at his bedroom door interrupted his maudlin thoughts. He frowned as he stood to answer the door. No one was supposed to be home. Mischa was gone, spending the last few days with a lover and didn't say when she would return. Robertus and Murasaki, perhaps reminiscing over their own past getaways, decided the day before to make their escape—only after triple-checking with Will if he would be all right on his own with Katinka. He reassured them, promised to look after their home and hugged them both goodbye.

"Good evening."

"Hannibal." Will couldn't hide his surprise at finding the man standing in his doorway, slight smile tilting the corner of his mouth. "I didn't know you got back."

"A few hours ago. You hadn't come down and I didn't wish to disturb you."

"Everything all right?" Hannibal had left early in the morning the day after his retirement party. The Lecters weren't concerned, but he had been gone three days.

"Better than, thank you. Where is Katinka?"

"Had her bottle and now she's out cold. I tired her out today." Will couldn't help smiling at the memory of playing most of the day away before her last bottle and a warm bath. Worked like a charm, since her great aunt wasn't around to spoil and soothe in equal measure.

"Excellent. With her asleep and content, for now, would you join me for dinner?"

Will glanced at the clock. It was a lot later than he thought it was. He nodded his agreement and followed Hannibal down to the dining room. A fire was lit. Several inches of snow arrived overnight and Will was constantly grateful the old castle wasn't as drafty as it could be. The lights were dimmed, never brighter than the flickering flames. Two places already set at the table, now bedecked in hyacinth and daisies with small branches of apple blossoms weaved throughout the sprawling bouquet.

As Will sat, Hannibal disappeared into the kitchen. Whatever it was, it smelled delicious. His stomach growled, reminding him that he only had coffee that morning. Even taking the time to prepare Katinka's formula throughout the day, making sure it was perfect before giving her even a sip, Will hadn't thought to make something for himself. He no longer took medication, a necessity and reminder in itself to eat. That little detail would just be kept to himself, as he could imagine the intense disapproval that knowledge would gain for him.

Hannibal returned with a platter, smiling as he set it on the table. Vegetables circled the blue and white dish, sprigs of dill here and there. Steaming in the center lay a heart. Sliced and dripping with a dark sauce, but the shape was unmistakable. Hannibal took Will's plate to fill

with tender roots and fragrant meat. He smiled again, brighter, as he set the offering before Will.

“Roasted heart with an herb stuffing, served with seasonal root vegetables and a chocolate gravy.”

“It's almost too beautiful to eat,” Will said as he took up his fork and knife.

“Nothing is too beautiful to eat.” Hannibal poured them a glass of wine before taking a delicate bite of his dinner.

The meat separated with little resistance, melting on Will's tongue. Buttery and rich. Rosemary and thyme tickled along his taste buds. A trace of oregano that washed away with sweet red wine. The faintest heat from the bitter cocoa warmed his throat. “This is delicious.”

“I'm happy you like it.” Hannibal watched him in between bites. “You seem different. Less troubled.”

Will paused in cutting another piece on his plate, meeting Hannibal's placid gaze. He was soft in this light. As much as a man compiled of sharp angles and hidden barbs could be. Still armored in a three-piece suit—dark gray with bright red windowpane lines. Silver tie with scarlet flowers hugging the strong expanse of his throat. The lion watched him with warm flesh on his glinting fork and yet Will smiled, taking up his glass to rest against his bottom lip before he replied.

“I am.” The little smile tugging at his mouth couldn’t be helped. He concealed it with a long pull of wine.

“Have you heard from friends? Family?”

“I did. A friend. I don't have family.” Will speared a turnip with some loose stuffing.

“Family is often what we make of it. It doesn't need to be through blood alone.”

“I never wanted to engineer a found family. It's always been a strange concept to me. The closest I came was collecting a group of stray dogs back when I lived in Virginia.”

“A pack of your own, with unconditional love and loyalty. You miss them a great deal.”

“I do. It was easy. An obligation I happily committed to because dogs are simple in their affections and expectations.”

“And now you find yourself on the receiving end of such a situation.” When Will only looked at him, he smiled. “A pack found you, this time.”

“Am I a stray, Hannibal?”

Hannibal watched him, all traces of lightheartedness fading as he looked him over. The dying firelight ignited the amber of his eyes to a red glimmer. “You are a perceptive, imaginative,

lone wolf, who would rather hide away than be overwhelmed by the mediocrity of mankind."

Will had to look away, force himself not to fidget with his dinnerware. "It's so much easier on the outskirts than bogged down by the chaotic mess of the middle."

"Do you still believe that?"

"I need to keep believing that."

"Even with Katinka in your life?" When Will couldn't find a way to respond, put to words what the last weeks had meant to him, Hannibal stood to fetch another bottle of wine. He leaned to lay a large hand over Will's shoulder, a soothing squeeze before letting go. "One day, you'll accept yourself and your place here. We'll be waiting all the while."

Chapter End Notes

If you want to imagine Gaspard Ulliel as Kasparas, please do. I did. That was me, hinting at Hannibal's habit of trying to find people who are of a like mind as his. Also, I like the idea of Hannibal thinking he might have found someone to be with who once played a younger version of Hannibal Lecter. :P We finally hear from Margot! Her username is a shout out to her character from the cult classic Ginger Snaps. I always was far too entertained by the fact that both Hugh Dancy and Katherine Isabelle were in werewolf movies. I hope this was entertaining for you all. I had a lot of fun with it. :D

Also, if you want to get a hold of me on tumblr please feel free! With the quarantine on, I have found myself more present on that site than usual.

Chapter Seven

Chapter Notes

> I like this chapter a lot. I believe it might be a bit shorter than some of the previous chapters but I'm not sure. What it lacks in numbers it makes up for in content. I think some pretty important details are given in this chapter. Big thanks to Sabi, Pia_Pia, ArchangelDemon, Greehatah, Somenumbers, Jor_ishere and jazzy2may for taking the time to stop and leave me such great comments. I really appreciate it and love to hear what you all are thinking of the story. I'm doing well, staying safe. I hope you are too, dear reader. Please enjoy the next installment. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Seven

The day was mild enough. Early Autumn snow still covered the ground and dusted the trees, but it wasn't the worst Will had seen. It was warm enough to be outside. Warm enough to do what he planned. He had settled on the back porch—what constituted as a back porch when living in a castle, anyway—not an hour before.

“When you said you wanted to borrow a car, I never would have guessed this was why.”

Will looked up from his spot on the floor at Mischa. She came from within the warmth inside, bundled in fashionable wool and fuzzy boots. A steaming mug in her hands and a fairly unimpressed expression on her face. He smiled and gazed down at his lap, thrilled with the fruits of his efforts earlier that day. Big brown eyes stared up at him with a hopeful kind of wariness.

“Did Uncle say you could?”

“Yes. You all have chickens and livestock, this isn't that weird of a thing.”

“We do?” She said it just to see the look he gave her. With a laugh she went back into the comfort of Castle Lecter. Not even the lure of cuddly cuteness enough to keep her outside.

Will returned to his task: grooming the puppy trying to escape his hold. Big paws. A bushy tail to grow into. Gangly limbs the eight week-old pup had yet to master. Her coloring was perfect, white and brown markings symmetrical and stark against shining black fur. He set aside the brush he bought earlier to run his hands through her silky fur, laughing as she grabbed his arm with her paws and gnawed his fingers with baby fangs.

She hopped out of the confines of his jean-clad legs, bouncing away from his hands. “Mira!”

Mira barely acknowledged his command as she took off running. Someone else stepped out onto the covered porch as she picked up speed. The pup gamboled right up to the new human and sat on his leather shoes, staring up at him with her tongue lolling out the side of her mouth. Will couldn't help laughing as he stood to collect her. Hannibal beat him to it, crouching to massage velvety ears. A smile teased his lips as she rolled over, showing her belly for him to rub. She went easily into his arms and he rose with her tucked against his coat.

“'Mira?' Did you just pick her up today?”

“Yeah. I spent some time looking at where I might find the kind of dog I've had in mind. Narrowed down my search to her.”

“Rebuilding your pack?”

They shared a smile, both thinking over their dinner only a few nights before. Will took her paw in his hand, rubbing over the still-smooth pads of her toes. “It's been on my mind. I wanted to find a companion for Katinka.”

“Katinka? You are aware, I'm sure, that this pup is already much bigger than yours. She's only going to get larger,” Hannibal added.

Will scoffed and took her from him. “Only for a little bit and then Katinka will catch up. And anyway, Bernese Mountain dogs are great with kids.”

“Are you planning for more?”

“Dogs or kids?”

“Either, both?” The apprehension in Hannibal's tone was almost completely masked. A valiant effort.

Will couldn't help smirking at Hannibal's alarm. “I had seven dogs back in Virginia. She won't be a problem.” He set her on the floor and held his hand above her after getting a piece of jerky from his pocket, clicking his tongue at her. Already she was familiar with the sound and what he wanted. The farm he got her from obviously started her training, he was grateful to find. Mira wobbled down into a squat, quiet and waiting until he tossed her the treat. “Yes. Good girl.”

Hannibal watched, pleased as Mira followed a series of commands. Simple things a young pup could remember. Stay. Sit. Lay down. Every completed task rewarded by Will's tidbits and praise. Will kept most commands in the language she was familiar with for now. Eventually, she would know both Lithuanian and English. She was clever. In the future, a perfect dog to protect Katinka.

“This is the first, and only, purchase I can think of that you've made in all this time.”

Hannibal's teasing filtered through Will's concentration. He scowled as he rubbed Mira down. “That's not true. I've bought things.”

“Items for Katinka don't count. Clothes and necessities don't count.”

“Well, you obviously haven't seen most of the ridiculous clothes Mischa insisted on buying me, then. I had to replace them with things I'd actually wear.”

Hannibal shrugged. “Mischa loves to shop. It doesn't matter for who. She picked out clothing that flatters you.” He looked over Will, clad in jeans and boots, a soft flannel shirt over a thick Henley. “As well as you fulfill the look of a lumberjack, you are startling when you wear the haute pieces Mischa chose especially for you. You should indulge her more often.”

He left Will to train Mira in silence. Will couldn't help smiling, cheeks pink from cold and words that would have been a sweet flirtation from anyone else.

* * * * *

He hadn't had one in years. While he was on medical leave from working the Homicide Department in Louisiana, transitioning from detective to an agent of the FBI, he fought a lot with his nerves. Memories that would never truly fade away. His mind didn't work like that. Every case, every interaction, as fresh as the day they happened. Useful in a lot of ways but also a pain in the ass. For a time he woke from nightmares, drenched in fear-sweat and unable to close his eyes again for hours after. The man who stabbed him always closing in on him, always sinking the knife true and unerringly. His shoulder often throbbed as if still bleeding and torn.

Then they happened more frequently. To the point where Will transferred within the FBI from murders to any other crime that needed their attention. It was how he met Margot Verger. His team was brought in to investigate Mason's suspected crimes that were more the white-collar variety. Only once he began digging, befriended Mason's terrified and haunted sister, did Will realize the depravity that the police were dealing with. A call-back to the more brutal activities he hoped he had left behind. Mason was using his family's slaughterhouse empire for more than money laundering and trafficking.

He had them almost every night during that dark time in his life.

And now he had another one. He almost forgot what they felt like, as much as he could. That tight, burning ache in his chest. The feeling of all the air being sucked from his lungs and unable to catch another calming breath. Waking to soaked sheets, sweat pouring off trembling limbs. He could have went without having another panic attack the rest of his life and it would have been too soon.

He did what he used to do. A cold shower. New sheets. Soft clothes that didn't feel like they were scraping against his skin as if he was just one walking exposed nerve. He didn't sleep. He didn't eat. He didn't speak unless he had to. A hard reset. The Lecters respected his need to be alone, taking care of Katinka when he couldn't. She needed fresh air and sunlight. Love from her family they happily and readily gave.

So long since his last panic attack but he knew the reason. It wasn't the pressure of Mason's bounty. It wasn't the possibility of threat that Charlie and Freddie presented. It wasn't from

fear for Margot and their unborn child. It wasn't even the guilt he felt over the part he had in Gabi and Nigel's deaths.

It was the feeling of soft skin against his when he cuddled Katinka straight from a bath in her tiny tub. The smell of flowers and sweet milk when he buried his nose in her hair. Her laughter that made him feel like he was floating whenever he heard it. Her whimpering cries of distress made him want to tear the world apart with his bare hands.

It was the warm touch on his arm. A soft breath whispered against his ear. The potential of strength and power coiled tight and dangerous beneath layers of silk and twill.

Secretive smiles. Glances from eyes that saw everything Will tried to hide from everyone else. Will didn't want to hide. Not from him. But hide he did, until he could trust himself once more. Lock tight the emotions that were trying to claw their way out of him. Desperate in their need to be known.

Will found himself once more unable to face them all just yet. He spent the last two days in his room. Katinka was with Mischa. Will took what comfort he could cuddling Mira, continuing her training while in self-imposed exile. Once again, he watched the world from his balcony, concealed by heavy curtains. Nigel's old rooms overlooked the back of the estate. Below, the ground was disturbed. Fresh, fluffy snow trampled and kicked up as Hannibal and Murasaki sparred.

They did it every morning. Rain, sun, snow or fog. Both clad in traditional padded robes but no masks. Fierce and experienced. Dancers with bamboo swords. Neither ever seemed to hold back. An equal amount of draws to wins on either side. Will watched whenever he could. No matter the distance between them he could see with aching clarity. Even from so far above he saw. The careful control Hannibal had on everything slipped away when he was like this. Revealing the viper beneath, ever ready to strike.

Honed and perfected over years of harsh discipline until his whole body was a weapon. Often their sparring switched from shinai to fists and feet, elbows and knees. Even the forehead on one memorable morning. They both didn't need a sword to be deadly.

He was beautiful.

It was getting harder to look away. To turn away. Will swallowed another wave of growing panic and retreated into the comforting darkness of his room. It was getting harder to deny what he wanted. And he wanted so much. He had no right to any of it.

* * * * *

Will dozed the day away on the soft sofa. Rekindling the fire as needed with an equally sleepy puppy on his chest. Mostly emotionally exhausted, his body and mind picked the worst time to finally force him to take stock of himself. This couldn't have happened while he was already stuck in bed? Dulled by painkillers, with nothing but time and his own thoughts for company? He wanted to be better, to push it all down so he could function once more for Katinka and the family that worried for him. But the thought of leaving his room threatened another spell of blinding panic.

It was late. Katinka returned to him fed and sleepy, with soft words of concern from Murasaki hours ago. Will could only attempt a smile, accepting the hug that came with the baby. He took his time doting on Katinka. A bath and soft pajamas. Rocked to sleep before he tucked her safely in her crib. He wouldn't be sleeping. It was during one of his moments of dozing, staring into the crackling flames of the fireplace, that he heard a knock on his door.

So faint he could have imagined it. It was past midnight. Will deposited Mira in her bed and brushed the hair from his clothes as he went to investigate. There was no one there. On the floor before his doorway was one saucer and fragile teacup. The pale liquid within steaming. He picked up the saucer and smiled despite the thoughts that had tormented him for days. A flower was tucked against the cup, wilted from the heat but still vibrant. Still lovely. A yellow buttercup.

Will took his gift back in his room. He settled into a chair by the fire, bringing the cup to his lips. A black tea. If he had to guess, a type of earl grey. He couldn't help smiling as he swallowed a warm sip. Vanilla with a slight aftertaste of lavender. A creaminess only steamed milk could achieve. Sweetened with honey. He drained the cup, feeling calm and slightly drowsy after. The sought after outcome by the one who left him the drink. But he didn't get ready for bed, finally succumbing to sleep.

It didn't take long to find his benefactor. Hannibal's door was opened, a soft glow coming from the darkened room. Will entered, taking in the furnishings and details that spoke of Hannibal's affinity for art and beauty, for comfort and quality. Dark, polished woods. Plush rugs. Jewel tones and dramatic fabrics. Several priceless paintings adorning the walls. The man Will sought was sitting near his own fire, sketchpad and pencils abandoned on the small table beside him.

Will approached to stare down at the pad. It could have been a black and white photo. The details so clear and fine. A young boy and even younger girl. The boy's face was familiar, but Will knew it wasn't a self-portrait he was looking at but a memory of Nigel and Mischa. How Hannibal remembered them. They were happy, innocent. Will tore his gaze from the sketch to seek out the artist. Hannibal had yet to look away from the fire, lost in the past. Chestnut hair soft and no longer held in place by product at the end of the day. Silk shirt so dark the teal appeared almost black.

His voice was hoarse from long silence. “Was Nigel happy?”

“I think so.” Will considered all he knew now, sympathetic to the man who seemed to be attempting to save the family he had. “He owned several nightclubs and invested in other side-projects. Had expensive tastes that he also lavished on those he loved. He was devoted to his family.”

“Did you know Nigel made his way completely on his own? Independent from his family's wealth and connections.”

“No, but that doesn't surprise me. Nigel didn't talk much about his family. Hardly spoke your names.”

“It was my fault.” Hannibal pressed his lips together, teeth pressing against the bottom one for a moment before releasing the irritated flesh. “Some things Nigel could never forgive me for.”

“What could he possibly turn his back on his twin for?” Will had seen a lot of things over the span of his adult life. Terrible things. Nothing Hannibal said could shock him.

Hannibal's eyes flicked to his for a moment before flitting away to something Will couldn't see. Something far in the past. “Shortly before our parents died, my father made arrangements for us to come live with my uncle. But the year we were thirteen and Mischa was eight, was a harsh year even without the loss of Mother and Father. That winter was brutal—as unforgiving and dangerous as the political landscape.”

“Russia still occupied the country then?”

“Yes. Looming over everything with their forbidding shadow. But that didn't matter to us. We had other concerns. Food was running out and the roads were impassable. Robertus was unable to take us away from our crumbling home. Forced to wait until the thaw.” He licked his lips, an eerie stillness coming over him. Shadows seemed to gather around him, concealing his eyes in darkness. “I remember coming into the barn, one bitterly cold day, to fetch Nigel and Mischa. I had found some things in the cellar to boil with snow to make a meager stew for us. There were unfamiliar voices within. Three men, yelling in Russian. Stragglers. Worthless fringe from a Russian battalion who lost their way in the recent blizzard. They hurt my sister, my brother. I thought I lost them. For a moment, I thought I was left alone. The only things I ever loved ripped from me.”

Will could guess from the glint in Hannibal's eyes, the shadows that flowed across his face, what happened to those men. He asked anyway. “Did you kill them?”

“Those animals were treated accordingly.” His words were a gentle hiss, void of remorse. “Mischa was traumatized for a long time after. She remembers nothing of what happened, and I am grateful every day for that small mercy. I nursed them both back to health. Cared for them. Brought them back to me. However I could. But Nigel knew what I did. The price I gladly paid to keep them both alive. He distanced himself from me. Once he was able, when we turned eighteen and graduated from academy, Nigel left his family behind. Left me behind.” A sad smile curved his mouth and he shook his head. “I could never get Nigel to understand. And now I never will.”

Will knew there was a lot he was leaving out. Dark and twisted things that were better left buried in the past. He couldn't judge or press for more, honored as he was that Hannibal shared what he had. “I think he did. You said yourself, he gained everything on his own. Everything he had was from his own cunning and ability. He was a powerful man in a city like Bucharest. Nigel wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty. Wasn't afraid to do everything he could to protect those he loved. And Nigel *was* coming back to you, Hannibal. He was.” Will leaned in to cover Hannibal's hand, a thrill running through him when Hannibal immediately turned his over to grasp Will's fingers. He gave Hannibal a comforting squeeze. The receptive touch gave him the courage to speak what he normally wouldn't dream of uttering aloud. “There are a lot of people in this world who deserve to be somebody's bacon. I would rather

Mischa and Nigel—for however many extra years he was given—be alive instead of those pigs."

A tear slid down Hannibal's cheek and Will thought nothing of wiping it away. The same act of comfort Hannibal did for him the day they met. Hannibal's eyes slid shut at the touch but he remained silent and still after that slight movement. Will pulled away without another word and slipped back to his room. He didn't dare linger or look back, afraid of what he would have done had he stayed.

Chapter End Notes

I really hope this didn't feel like an info dump to you all. I've been looking forward to posting this chapter for a while because a lot of things were hinted at and explained here. I hope you liked my humble alterations to Hannibal Lecter's backstory. I wanted it to fit as closely as it could. However, it would be different anyway, with Hannibal being younger. And then I went and threw in a Nigel and a surviving Mischa. :) I think it works, myself. I'd love to hear your thoughts. And, yes, I worked in the detail that Hannibal and Lady Murasaki still practice kendo. :D

It was important to me to add the idea that I think Will's mental health is a precarious thing. He has an empathy disorder, technically. To me, I think Will not only has trouble controlling his emotions, unlike Hannibal, but he acutely feels everything all the time. I feel this would open him up to a higher risk of bouts of depression. Especially since he is wrestling with so many emotions right now. I know this is part rom-com but I wanted to take a moment to address that Will is not fine. He feels alone because of the lies he's put in place and guilty for the moments of happiness he does experience. A rough place to be. However, since this is a love story, think of this as the part in the rom-com where there's the low, sad part before things start to get better. ;)

Hope you all enjoyed the chapter! Once again, stay safe, sane and healthy during this strange time!

~CReed

Chapter Eight

Chapter Notes

> And so the story progresses. Several points are explored here--a few more glances into Will's shrouded life. A tad different pace than Mrs. Winterbourne, but I don't see what happened to the two main characters of the movie happening quite like that with Hannibal and Will. But, really, did I expect nothing less from two intense characters? Not really, no. :) I guess I should mention that this story is officially part of the Reel Hannibal Challenge. I'm new to this, so we'll see how this all goes. :D Huge, sincere thanks to Sabi, Pia_Pia, Greehatah, Jor_ishere, Tia and Stellar_Infires for taking the time to leave me such lovely comments last chapter. I appreciate you not only sticking with me for all this but also letting me know you're out there and like what I'm doing with the story. I hope everyone enjoys this next installment. Wherever everyone's at right now, I hope your safe, sane and healthy. Or able to rest and heal.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Eight

Will finally slept but woke long before sunrise. He got up, showered and dressed for what he planned. Katinka barely fussed when he took her from her warm bed and sat with her in the rocking chair, her soft body limp against him as she drifted back to sleep. Touching her, running his fingers through her hair, helped him focus. Organized his thoughts and priorities. He set her back beneath her blanket after just a few minutes of coddling.

When he was outside, small bag thrown in the backseat of the car Mischa was letting him borrow, Will sent Robertus a text. He would be gone for the day. If they didn't mind looking after Katinka, he would be grateful to them for their help and understanding. There were some things he needed to take care of. Too long put off. He didn't wait for, nor expected to receive, a reply any time soon. It was far too early for even Robertus to be awake.

The coordinates were put into his phone by memory and he ignited the car's engine. Quiet, purring—the Lincoln MKX barely made a sound as he pulled away from the estate. It had been a while since he drove. Where he was in Bucharest only called for taxis or subways. He walked most of the time. A car was too much commitment and a hassle when he might have to drop everything to leave behind. It was nice not having to be taken everywhere. A small taste of independence he had missed since he fled the states. The car handled beautifully and would be able to go where he needed.

It really wasn't far from the Lecters. A few hours past cities and towns. The last village from it quite a drive. But to think they were so close made Will marvel at the idea of coincidence and chance. The sun was barely peeking above the horizon by the time he turned onto an overgrown trail, almost hidden by snow. No one had been that way in years. The forest

threatened to swallow it all up. The car jostled along the road and Will vowed to clean and detail it once he was done. Not that Mischa would care. She had four other vehicles.

Finally at his destination, Will killed the engine and got out of the car. His breath fogged the air. It seemed colder. Darker. As if the trees choked what little warmth and light there was from the area. Animals called to each other from the shadows. They didn't care that he was there. This was their territory. He set a cautious boot on the first step of the cabin, testing the wood for rot. It groaned but held his weight and he climbed the rickety porch to try the door.

No one bothered locking it. There was nothing around for miles. Abandoned. Deep in the woods of the Lithuanian countryside. A long time since even a hunter might have wandered in to seek shelter. Will flicked on the flashlight he brought from his bag in the car, casting beams of light through the one-room cabin. No electricity or indoor plumbing. A few leaves that were blown in and tons of cobwebs. Probably a hundred years old. But it was sturdy and standing. No holes in the roof or broken windows. Nothing that couldn't have been repaired.

It would have served as his last destination before making his way to wherever Margot told him to meet her. His last safe house. Absolutely not anything close to what Margot most likely selected for her sanctuaries but Will didn't need much. He had prepared to hunt and fish the last months of hiding. Foraging for edible plants and the rest would come from cans. The point was to fall completely off the grid. This was a perfect place to hide. One Will found after his searches and studying maps for rarely traveled and unmarked locations.

He flicked the light off and sighed, leaving the cabin to sit on the steps. As unplanned as the last months had been, he did have options. Terrible though they were, he did have them. Ages ago, Margot set him up with an offshore account. Never once did he access it. Knowing Margot, there was a disgustingly large amount of money waiting inside. He still hadn't checked for himself. The risk of Mason possibly finding him through it had never been worth making a withdrawal. Not until he needed it, until all other options were gone.

With it, he could stock the place. Hole up until Margot called for him. The thought made acid burn heavy in his stomach.

Was that what he really wanted? The question niggled in the parts of his mind that he didn't want to explore. Spoken with an amused insistence that sounded a lot like Hannibal.

With nothing but trees and the wind and the snow silent and watching, Will allowed himself to truly think about his future. Margot needed his protection. She had been through too much on her own. He refused to make her face Mason alone. But they weren't in love. Hell, she wasn't even attracted to him, and he never felt that for her either—beautiful woman or not. That was one of the reasons why she picked him. It was all ever just an arrangement. Margot told him, once she knew for certain she was pregnant, that she didn't mind him being in her baby's life. It was her baby, though. Will was excited for their arrival. Would kill for them. Do anything to protect them and their mother. But they never felt like his.

Like how Bell felt like his.

The thought bloomed warm and bright in his chest. What if he didn't walk away? He could take care of his business. Deal with Mason. See Margot back home, or wherever she decided

to go. Then he could disappear. Settle into the family he cared for. Become the father he never thought he wanted to be, but now couldn't imagine not having the responsibility. Considering such options filled him with a strange sort of relief and happiness. He could let go. Let Will Graham go. What did he have, anyway? His career and his dogs. His special way of thinking that made him a valuable tool for the FBI. His little house in Wolf Trap, Virginia. His books and his solitude and his fishing.

When he thought of Katinka, all he saw were possibilities for a future he never knew he could consider. For all his gifts of imagination, he never realized he could have so much more than nightmares and death. Depravity and uninspiring sadism. The world was so ugly and yet, he had stumbled upon beauty. Raw and wild. Innocent and pure. Suddenly, his intricate and painstakingly cultivated plans were no longer as promising and fulfilling as they had been.

All he would have to do to obtain that life was let go of Will Graham.

* * * * *

As much time Will spent thinking and analyzing the day away, he didn't have many solid decisions to show for it. What he did know for sure was that he wasn't going to use the cabin. It would be in the back of his head. Ready if he needed it. A contingency resource. He still didn't check the bank account. Hopefully, he would never have to. Part of him knew it would be good to look, to configure into his plans. Another part was childish and stubborn and wanted nothing to do with Verger money. That latter part often won. As his current situation proved.

There was a light coming from the caretaker's cottage when he drove along the winding lane to Castle Lecter. Mischa was home. He wondered if she was up at the main estate but doubted it. Dinner should have been over a while ago and she hardly ever lingered, back to her own place to work on her next project. Will didn't bother taking the car around to the garage. It could wait until the next day. The interior of the castle was warm and inviting. When he hung up his coat he could see lights on in the main sitting room.

He had to hold his hand out to keep Robertus and Murasaki from rising from their cuddled position on one of the sofas. They looked happy and cozy. Teacups of something hot shared between them.

“Good evening, Gabriel.” Robertus smiled at him as he came further into the room.

“Evening,” he said to them both.

“You look very fine tonight. A little time to yourself seems to have done a lot of good.” Robertus looked him over, checking for any sign of disorder.

“It did. Thank you for looking after Bell today.” He knew they worried over him. Especially the last few days. They never pushed or made demands. Their support and patience was something Will would never be able to put to words what it meant to him.

“It was no trouble. Have you eaten,” Murasaki asked.

“I did, thank you. A little something at a cafe Mischa showed me. I'm going to get ready for bed.” He leaned in without thinking, shocked at how easy it was to hug them both. To accept their returning squeeze.

He wished them a good night and began the climb to the second floor. His room was dark, fireplace cold. Katinka somewhere else as the last rays of sun slipped beneath the horizon. Mira didn't come when he called. Her bed abandoned for other interests and people. Will left the room in a similar search. Once again, it wasn't hard to find what he sought.

He couldn't help the amusement he felt at the sight that greeted him when he came into Hannibal's room. The new playpen was out of place amongst the antiques and finery. Though he knew Hannibal spent an insane amount on the thing. What it lacked in heirloom value it made up for in the very best money could buy. It was empty. Katinka was instead being lightly bounced and petted as her uncle slowly paced, careful of a sleeping Mira nearby.

Katinka was calm, lax. Little legs limp and hands flexing on Hannibal's pale silver shirt. Her white sundress had sunflowers on it. Something new that Will had never seen on her before. Another purchase Hannibal must have made. She was utterly content as Hannibal sang quietly to her. A sad-sounding melody. The more Will listened the more he was positive it wasn't Lithuanian. Hannibal's mouth perfectly shaped the Russian words. Something he must have grown up hearing. He stopped mid-verse, taking a breath before he turned and met Will's stare.

Will came forward and smiled. “Someone's had a productive day.” He glanced to the playpen.

Hannibal returned the smile and ran gentle fingers down Katinka's back. “Quite. It took more time than I would have liked putting together, but it won't collapse and gives Katinka a change of scenery.”

“Does she like it?”

“Not at all.”

Will laughed and put his hand to the back of her neck, smiling when she made a sleepy snuffle as he rubbed her shoulder. “It was a good thought. I'm sure there are many more things you have found to lavish Bell with. Something's bound to stick. Try the box it came in.”

“Bell?”

“Her nickname.” It was the most obvious thing in the world but Hannibal only stared at him, confused. “You know: Katinka. Tink. Tinker Bell. Bell. It's an evolution, of sorts.” He shrugged, unapologetic and unwilling to budge on his position.

Hannibal actually laughed at that. Not a smile or a chuckle. Maybe he was tired. Frazzled by spending a day fiddling with contraptions he wasn't used to fiddling with, or taking care of Katinka for longer than he ever had before. Either way, it was a genuine laugh and Will had never heard or seen something more appealing than Hannibal laughing.

He took Hannibal by his strong jaw and pulled him into a kiss.

Soft lips. Rough stubble. Cologne like campfires and forests full of green. Sweet wine at dinner. Something pink, he guessed. It tickled the tip of his tongue which Hannibal quickly coaxed into his mouth. Exactly how Will imagined him to feel and taste. He pressed closer when Hannibal slipped his free arm around his waist. Slowly thoughts started to trickle back into Will's brain, pushing the wonderful sensations of Hannibal away to swallow him in dread.

How could he do this, knowing he was presenting the man with nothing but lies? A sham of an existence. A snake in the nest. He didn't realize he was apologizing, over and over against reddened lips, until he heard Hannibal's gentle reassurance through the din of his pulse.

Hannibal was shushing him, lips skimming from his temple back to his mouth. “It's all right.”

Will couldn't bear to hear whatever comforts Hannibal offered. He had no right to them, to him. He shook his head and took Katinka from Hannibal's unresistant hold to flee back to his room. Choked apologies spouted the whole way out the door.

In the safety of his room he held Katinka and wept. Fuck. What was he thinking? Earlier that day his future seemed so bright. Endless in happiness and possibilities. But the reality of it all crashed down on him the moment he kissed Hannibal.

Hannibal would always be considered his brother-in-law. Still somewhat suspicious of Will's relationship with his twin brother. His dead brother. He took Will in because he was supposed to be once considered married to Nigel, father to Nigel's child. And Will selfishly wanted more. But not like this. This wasn't what he wanted. This wasn't ever the plan. He never intended to use Hannibal, or his family, this way. They all deserved so much better, so much more, than him. He would only bring them pain. Even as *Gabriel*. But never moreso than as Will Graham.

Katinka whimpered in his tight hold, picking up on his anxiety. He swallowed the rest of his sobs, willing the tremors away that shuddered through him. He kissed her cheeks and whispered his apologies. “I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'll be better. I promise.”

What he wanted didn't matter. It was Katinka's safety and happiness that did. Nigel's family's happiness and comfort mattered. They deserved respect. Will could give them that. He could politely distance himself. Build barriers of propriety before everything got even further out of hand.

The idea of rules and restrictions calmed Will enough to where he no longer felt tears pressing against the backs of his eyes or an ache filling his chest. Other things called his attention. There was no time to wallow, to fall back into the depression that had held him the past few days. If he chose this life, he needed to commit fully to it. If he really was going to erase Gabi’s existence to replace with his own, he needed her sacrifice to not be for nothing. No more selfish desires. No more wishing for more than he already had. Gabi and Will would be as if they never were so Gabriel Lecter could survive. To give Katinka everything her parents no longer could.

That had to be enough. It would be enough. He started the nightly ritual of getting Katinka ready for bed. She splashed and giggled in the bath, cooing and gurgling softly when he rinsed the fine suds from her hair. By the time he put her in powder-blue footie pajamas, she was ready to snuggle beneath her blanket. He left her lamb within reach, kissed her head and lightly closed the door to her room.

He finally started to build a fire when there was knocking at his door. The sparking kindling grew into a blaze. Will stood to answer the door. His hand came to rest on the crystal knob, but unable to go through with twisting it. “Yes?”

“May I come in?” Hannibal sounded so close, as if he was leaning against the sturdy wood of the door.

He shouldn't. They needed some time apart from one another. The thought made him want to hit something. But they also needed to face this. It had to be discussed and dealt with. Will needed to deal with Hannibal, and all the feelings the man evoked inside him. He opened the door and walked back to the center of the room. He didn't want their voices to wake Katinka.

Mira ran inside as soon as the entrance was wide enough, finding her bed and settling down. Hannibal shut the door behind him, approaching on silent feet until he stood before him. He only watched him, giving away nothing. No anger or disgust. No amusement. Just that calm curiosity. Waiting to see what Will would do.

“I'm sorry.” Will needed it to be said. A line drawn between them.

“For what, exactly, are you apologizing?”

“You know what.”

“For kissing me? Or for leaving immediately after without a single coherent word?”

Will winced, unable to look at him. It was harder to hear from such a soft tone. He wasn't yelling. Hannibal never yelled. “It was wrong of me to do that to you.”

“How so?”

“Your family has been nothing but kind and generous. You have been nothing but understanding and accommodating. I took advantage. I overstepped. I'm sorry,” he repeated. It was all he could do. Hannibal came closer, a strange smile quirking up the corner of his sharp mouth. The potential of something cruel. Will's eyes drifted everywhere but him when Hannibal ran a gentle hand along his jaw.

“Am I a replacement, then?” There came that amusement. Will knew he would see it in his eyes, in his growing smile, if he had the courage to lift his gaze. “Do you see Nigel when you look at me? Are you seeking comfort and pleasure from a dead man?”

“No.” The answer was immediate and guttural, as if it tore out of him to be heard. To finally be known. He made himself maintain eye contact. If nothing else, this he would be completely honest about. “Nigel was charming and funny. Nigel was ostentatious and

uncouth. Nigel was handsome and strong and rude and clever. I'll never not feel remorse when I think about Nigel. But I ache for someone else. I only see him. I only want him. Every part of him. Not Nigel. Hannibal. Cold, calculating Hannibal. Quiet, curious, contemplative Hannibal. Dangerous, beautiful Hannibal."

The lion, the viper, moved before Will could even think to respond. The gentle grip vanished. Warm, large hands gripped the sides of his face and pulled. Will stumbled forward, startled yelp swallowed by greedy lips. Harsh kisses. Demanding teeth. For a moment he was sure he was bleeding. He folded Hannibal into his arms, hands spanning the broad expanse of his back. He felt like he could rip through the silk of Hannibal's shirt with the rough, digging slide of his fingers he scoured down the shifting muscles. Hannibal only grunted in pleasure at the sensation and bit harder, enjoying Will's slipping control. His hands moved to cradle Will's face. Grasping turned to caresses. Hungry kisses faded to nuzzling pecks against abused lips.

Hannibal leaned only far enough away to speak. Eyes of firelight flicking over Will's face, cataloging everything they found. "You've been alone so long, haven't you? All of this, you have done on your own. You don't have to anymore. You must know that."

"I can't. It has to be this way. Has to." Yet Will pulled him back to him, stealing another kiss.

Hannibal breathed a small laugh against his mouth. "It doesn't. Not anymore."

Will only realized they were moving, that Hannibal was herding him backwards, when the flames of the fire weren't so warm on his arms. When he felt Hannibal's hands glide down his spine to grip the thick hem of his Henley that hid the top of his jeans. His own hands pulled at Hannibal's collar, the buttons slipping easy from their hold beneath his calm touch. Oddly calm. Will had never felt so sure in his movements. Hannibal's touches on his bare skin made a strange whimper escape him that was quickly kissed away.

"I can help you. Let me help you." Hannibal slid his hand into Will's hair, kissing him between every hushed demand. "Ask me. Tell me to."

Will could only nod, forehead pressed tight against Hannibal's until he turned to run his lips across Will's scar. His breath caught in his throat, a choked gasp, when Hannibal's grip tightened in his hair, yanking to focus Will's attention back to him.

"Tell me."

"Yes. Help me. I need you, Hannibal."

Hannibal lifted Will's shirt up and away, dropping it at their feet to be forgotten. He trailed his lips along his wounds, old and new. Will's tears fell fresh and fast at each touch. Hannibal eagerly tasted them as he did everything else. Will was just as esurient, starved and gorging on what Hannibal eagerly fed him. Will pulled Hannibal free of his clothes, layer by fine layer. Until there was nothing left between them. Until Hannibal gave him everything he demanded with teeth and tongue, hands and hips. Hannibal surrendered willingly, happily. Easily.

It was all so easy once he gave in.

The bed always seemed too big. Lonely and cold and empty. Now Will luxuriated in the expanse of the mattress. The slip of soft cotton. The world shrank down to just those things, those sensations. And Hannibal above and around him, gasping and writhing beneath his clutching palms. Fit so snug between his thighs, trapped. Where else would the man rather be?

Perfect. Will tugged at his hair, letting the silky strands fall through his fingers. Beautiful. The most beautiful man he had ever seen. He said it aloud. Hannibal's pace quickened against him, undone by words and flesh. There would be bruises where Hannibal gripped his hips and thighs. He grabbed Will's wrist, no longer sprained and damaged, to lay kisses across veins visible beneath the pale skin. His lips ran along Will's palm. Ravenous.

The climax crested before Will had time to savor the act. It winded him like a punch to the gut. Torn from him. He held Hannibal to him, biting into his shoulder as the intensity of it all washed over and through him. The pain made Hannibal snarl, teeth shining in the dull light as he bared them. For a short eternity after there was nothing but the sound of Will's heart hammering in his chest. The harsh breaths they took in an attempt to regain control. Soft hums and murmurs of exhausted enjoyment.

Will kissed wherever he could reach. Hannibal shuddered against his lips. A shaking hand ran through Will's damp hair. And then suddenly he was gone. Will watched as Hannibal slipped from the bed, waiting for the over-sensitivity of his nerves to subside. Hannibal was golden and glistening and moving further away than Will cared for. He returned shortly, easing Will near him to run a warm wet cloth across his stomach and thighs. Once that was disposed of in the bathroom, Hannibal fell back into bed.

They worked together to pull the blankets around them, huddled beneath goose down and silk embroidery. Hannibal gathered him close, nuzzling into his hair and pressing kisses to his face and neck. Insatiable. The word came to Will, but he knew not who it described. He had wound his arms around Hannibal and tangled their legs together as soon as he was within reach once more. With Hannibal tucked into his neck, Will fell asleep before the sweat cooled from his body.

* * * * *

There were no nightmares. No bloody skulls shrieking maniacal laughter. No friends slipping away before Will could reach out to them. No clip-clop of hooves and black feathers glinting in moonlight. No smell of cigarettes and cologne marred by blood. No sounds of twisting metal and crying babies. He did wake, once, in the middle of the night. There was a crying baby, but not the pitiful whimpers of an injured child. Katinka was hungry. Or needed a fresh diaper. Or she was simply lonely, wanting the presence of the people who catered to her every need. Will woke, trained and conditioned now to respond to the sound.

A whisper against his ear. Gravel-rough that sent a thrill down his spine. *Sleep*. A soft command. Lilting and gentle. A language not his own but understood perfectly. A word Will picked up after weeks spent in this home. He had cracked an eye open to find Hannibal

clambering out of bed to stumble to Katinka's room. The most inelegant Will had ever seen him. He fell back to sleep smiling.

Even before opening his eyes, he knew it was a little later than when he usually got up. The light coming from the slightly opened drapes let him know it was still technically morning. A differentiation that meant Hannibal would insist on brunch instead of breakfast. At the thought he smiled and stretched along the body he was partially laying on. When he looked up his smile only grew. Hannibal was already awake.

“Good morning.”

Instead of verbally answering, Will leaned in for a kiss. One arm beneath Hannibal, tingling from the prolonged position. The other splayed across his waist. He ran his hand up and down Hannibal's side. Pulling away sent a shiver through him that he knew the other man felt. Hannibal was playing with the limp strands of his hair, a strange kind of smile curling his lips. Will could feel it rolling off Hannibal as he looked at him. Amazement. At Will. Like he was some rare thing that Hannibal could hardly believe found its way to him. Will sighed and lowered back down, hugging closer with his head supported on a broad chest.

Hannibal slid his hand to cradle the back of Will's head, still petting and tugging his hair. “I was afraid you would regret what happened when you woke.”

Will scoffed but didn't retreat. “You know very well that you've worked hard to make sure I can't.”

Hannibal laughed, the sound an echoing rumble against Will's cheek. “Still, it's always nice to hear from one's intended that they noticed one's efforts.”

“It was noticed.”

“How are you feeling? You have struggled the past few days, moreso than usual.” He brought his free hand down to rub the length of Will's spine. Up and down. Gentle press and knead. Comforting and stabilizing. “I worried for you. We all did.”

“Right now, I'm fine. Better than fine. Mira isn't howling to go outside, yet. You're in my bed. Bell's safe in her room.”

“I am sensing a fear of future apprehension.”

Will bit Hannibal's pectoral muscle. “I can see now why you picked psychiatry as your fall-back occupation.”

Hannibal hissed, pulling Will closer. “And I can see your attempt at distraction.” He sighed as Will settled, trailing fingertips along the old scar on his shoulder. “Tell me what you anticipate that is so terrible.”

Will leaned up once more. Propped on his elbow to better see the man he spent the night with. He traced the sharp line of his cheek with a careful hand, following the stubble to his jaw, tickling down to the dips of his collarbone. There must have been another time that Will

had a similar experience but couldn't recall any detail if he had. In his, admittedly small, pool of experience he knew he never lingered after sex. There was no point. His partners got what they wanted and he the same. He didn't want people seeing too deeply and they didn't want in. They either stomached his surly personality long enough to enjoy his looks and body or it was a fast affair that stemmed from anything from a misplaced sense of protectiveness to rivalry to a means to an end. He couldn't imagine doing that now. To Hannibal. Treating him like a passing fancy. Something to scratch an itch. It wasn't even the sex. Which was phenomenal thus far, he wouldn't lie.

It was everything that came before and after. The promise of more. The idea that it all would never stop leaving him breathless. The connection. The sense of knowing and known. So much more intimate than Will ever thought possible.

He took his hand away but didn't pull back. “I'm terrified to tell Robertus. I've imagined so many times what his reaction could be and it's never good. He could, justifiably, be angry. Or heartbroken. I don't want to hurt him. I didn't mean for any of this to happen. I didn't mean to feel this way.”

Hannibal only smiled and sat up, taking Will with him. He kissed him, biting and teasing until Will dropped his head down onto his shoulder to catch his breath. “I can assure you, that is not something you need to fear.” He stood from the bed. “Come down and have brunch with us. I'm going to start preparing Katinka's formula.”

With that, Hannibal all but bounced from the room. Energetic and graceful and ready for the day. Will groaned and dropped back down to the mattress with a hard thud. He would do what was asked of him. In a minute. Right now, he only wanted to cling to the pillow Hannibal had slept on and hide for a little while longer. He couldn't help smiling though.

He was right about brunch.

Chapter End Notes

A few things: First, Hannibal sang to Katinka a Russian children's song that can be translated as "Silk Tassels." It's a very beautiful, somewhat haunting, music box kind of song. Here is a link if you're curious. I can also provide translated lyrics if anyone really wants to know what's being said. :)

Second, there isn't a sex scene in Mrs. Winterbourne. I don't want to spoil the movie so I'll leave it at that. I wrote this chapter with and without and found that the progression of their relationship made sense, to me, this way. Do they need sex to show they care for one another? Not at all. Was it the smartest thing for Will to do, or Hannibal for that matter? No. It's not necessarily the wrong choice either. But I wanted to explore a little bit more Will's psyche with this. Hannibal is still very much The Man Behind The Curtain so I can't go into his thoughts at the moment. Will is fair game. This is his love story, after all. I wanted to convey how terribly lonely he is, even before this. He has a

connection to Hannibal. He hates so much that he found it right now. What a terrible time to find his soulmate! He tried, but Hannibal has his own desires and Will can't keep fighting what he feels. As terrified as Will is of getting close to someone, and letting people too close, he aches for that now from the one person who speaks his "language" fluently. Sex or otherwise. Also, I hope the scene didn't read as a bunch of purple prose.

Third, I don't write graphic sex scenes. Not really. Nothing against them, but I don't want to spend several thousands of words on explicit detail when I could write several thousands of words on everything going on around the act itself. This didn't feel too graphic, to me. Let me know if I should change the rating.

Fourth, I've been looking at my outline and this should all conclude at fifteen chapters. I wasn't sure for a while, but now that I've written eleven of them I think I can safely estimate how much this will take.

I hope everyone reading enjoyed this chapter. Stay safe and healthy!

~CReed

Chapter Nine

Chapter Notes

> A short chapter. Shorter than the average chapter in this story, I should say. A kind of Intermission. Huge thanks to Greehatah, Pia_Pia, Jor_Ishere, Stellar_Infires, ropaola and RowanTheBoat for taking the time to leave me such lovely comments. I always appreciate the time you all take to stop and leave me a few words. I hope everyone who's still with me enjoys this next installment. Stay safe, sane and healthy, dear readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Nine

By the time Will made it downstairs, he could already hear the clink of silverware against china. Low, pleasant chatter. A laugh now and then. When he entered the dining room he was met with smiles and warm greetings. Nothing in their expressions telling him they knew of the change in his and Hannibal's relationship. It looked like they had already finished most of their meal. Will sat down just as Hannibal came from the kitchen with two more plates.

Will had been so careful. Took effort in his appearance. Showered. Went as far as selecting dark slacks and a light blue twill shirt that Mischa bought him. Tried to appear and act as normal as ever. Nothing out of place. The collar of his shirt hid the multiple bruises and teeth marks left to stand out on his pale neck. All that effort dashed to pieces.

Hannibal ruined everything.

The man served them all with a spring to his step. Wearing not his usual suit or silk button-up shirt and slacks, but loose pajama pants and a worn cashmere sweater. Old and well-used. Baggy and deceptive. Hiding the hard muscle and defined body Will knew for a fact was beneath. Rumpled and relaxed and obvious in how he spent his evening. And if it wasn't obvious, Hannibal made sure there was no doubt.

He set Will's plate before him and leaned to kiss the scar on his forehead. “You look radiant.”

“You look shameless,” Will replied and turned to land a quick peck on the corner of Hannibal's smirk. There was no point in secrecy now.

Hannibal took the seat beside him, not bothering to respond to the charge in any way other than smiling and taking a bite of the bacon on his plate. Absolutely unrepentant that they had an audience. He passed him a cup of strong coffee, pushing the sugar and milk closer for when Will inevitably reached for it. A scone bursting with sweet cream and jam found its way to Will's plate before he even made a dent in his frittata and crispy bacon rounds. And

oysters? Will shook his head as he swallowed the decadent bite, but he couldn't help the small smile he hid behind his cup.

He lifted his gaze from his plate and locked eyes with Mischa over a bouquet of dark-hued flowers and small, twisting branches that vibrant tree moss clung to. Slowly her slender lips curved into a smirk that was too close in resemblance to her brother's for his liking. She was far too pleased when she said, “I'm just glad there has finally been some kind of resolution to this chase. Would you not agree, auntie?”

Murasaki's smile was soft, humoring her niece. She finished her glass of orange juice, plate cleared, before she stood. Her silk kimono fluttered around her to reveal a peacock down the length of her sleeve. She placed her hand over Will's shoulder for the briefest touch. Hannibal smiled, pausing from eating, when she slid her fingers through his soft, yet to be styled hair as she past him to leave the room. “Yes, Mischa. Though, I did very much enjoy observing the courtship.”

“Don't tease, darling,” Robertus said as he patted Mischa's hand. They shared a smile but said nothing more.

Will was speechless. Surely, they were shocked? Appalled? They must have questions. Objections. He looked to Hannibal and found his intense gaze already on him, watching him. The look was clear to Will. He had been thrown into the deep end, before he could work himself into a panic. No time to second-guess. No room for indecisiveness or being wishy-washy. Sink or swim. Will chose to swim, trusting Hannibal to be his paddle when he needed him. Hannibal looked away as he took up his coffee, satisfied and secure in Will's silence. He knew Will's decision as if he had spoken aloud. There was no going back.

* * * * *

Will stepped into the open doorway as quietly as he could. He had disturbed so much of the world around him and didn't look forward to further disruption. But it had to be done. He had to be sure. Robertus looked up from his computer screen and smiled, removing the gold-framed glasses that were perched on the end of his nose.

“Hallo, Gabriel.”

Will took a step into his office. “I wanted to talk to you. If you're not too busy.”

“I'm not too busy.” Robertus leaned back in his chair, waiting for Will to sit across from him.

It took a lot longer to speak than he thought. Earlier, he worked up his courage. All his reasons made in neat little columns and categories, organized so orderly in his mind. Now it all fled. Every solid defense he had escaped him. His head was empty for what felt like the first time in his life. Finally, he abandoned his excuses and voiced his one true concern. “Do you approve? Of Hannibal and I being together?”

When he risked looking, he found Robertus gazing at him with those seemingly all-seeing, mis-matched eyes. A master of micro-expressions like his nephew. There might have been a smile hidden in that look focused entirely on Will. “If I don't?”

“I would end it. If you asked me to, I would stop what we've only just started.” The thought felt like a jagged piece of glass slicing down through the length of Will's body, but he had an all right poker face too.

“Considering your circumstances, I realize how silly my next question will be. Nevertheless: are you happy, Gabriel?” When Will didn't answer, Robertus continued, “I know Hannibal is. My nephew is not easy to understand. So often he is amused with life, with the people carrying out their existence alongside him, but he purposely keeps himself separate. Rarely does anything capture more from him than fleeting interest. So many interests, so many toys; he will examine and learn all of their inner mechanisms before tossing them aside. Bored of their simple structures. That has not been the case with you. I am aware of Hannibal's opinion of you from when you first came to us. His suspicions and wariness. He made no secret of it, as I am sure you know.” He did smile then, as if remembering conversations had with his nephew over his concerns. “Not much has changed. However, in his desire to know you, he accomplished that very thing. You frustrate and confound him. He finds you entirely mesmerizing and enchanting.”

Will sighed and clasped his hands together in his lap to keep from fidgeting. “This is more complicated than simply being happy.” He took a deep breath and calmed himself. Robertus demanded truth with his very presence and Will would attempt giving him such. He owed him what he could. Will put to words, voiced, what he discovered only the day before at the lonely place that would have been his sanctuary had it not been for colliding with the Lecters. “Hannibal eases a loneliness inside me that I didn't know I had, until I met him. He understands me better than anyone ever has. And I know the timing is inconvenient. I know it's selfish and inappropriate. I'd give anything to have met him differently. But I can't change Fate. And I can't deny how essential he is to me—how all of you are essential to me now—as much as Bell is.”

Robertus leaned his elbows onto his desk, resting his chin in his palm. He smiled as he caught Will's gaze. Sad because he understood. “Then I approve, dear boy.”

* * * * *

When Hannibal found him to ask if he'd come with him, Will wasn't sure what to expect. He was told to dress for warmth and prepare for the outdoors. They set out shortly after. Will was already used to the cold. Living in the middle of nowhere in Virginia could be harsh, brutal. Bundled up, he followed Hannibal, who was protected by an ankle-length black fur coat and matching hat. Severe and striking against the blinding pale of the snow and leafless trees.

Will followed, footfalls muffled as they made their way along a trail deep in the woods surrounding Castle Lecter. Hannibal was sure in step, silent as he led the way. It gave Will nothing but time to think. He marveled at how different everything was from a few days before, yet nothing had changed. The Lecters still saw to his every need, insisting on making a place for him in their family. Will still waited for any kind of word from Margot. Still planned his next encounter with Mason. Katinka grew and flourished, happy and lively and Will's reason for not completely disappearing inside himself.

The only difference between a week ago and now was the shift in his relationship with Hannibal Lecter. The man became so many things to him in a short span of time. Grudging

family member. Potential threat. Comfort. Confidante. Were they ever friends? Will didn't think so. There was always something more, simmering just beneath the surface of their interactions. Always on the line of hostility and flirtation. The feelings between them could easily have culminated into either bloodshed or tangled bed sheets.

It was inevitable the progression that concluded into lovers.

So far, Will had only caught glimpses of what lurked beneath Hannibal's handsome calm. What he shared with Will hinted at his capabilities. It sent a pleasant shiver down his spine. Hannibal was a very capable man. One who Will welcomed wholeheartedly into his bed and body. Eager in his desire to know more. See everything. Keep close and guard all of Hannibal's terrible and ugly thorns and spines he kept secret. No more demanding than Hannibal was of him, pulling everything Will buried to the surface to collect and hoard.

They broke the treeline and Will gasped at the sight, lungs filling with exhilarating cold. Hannibal led him a few more feet before he turned with a smile, holding out a gloved hand for Will to take. He stepped onto the snow-covered dock, careful not to slide in the ice.

“It has yet to completely freeze. After your reaction to the pier, I thought you might enjoy coming here.” Hannibal finally broke their companionable silence as they walked to the rail.

Further out Will could see the water. Even as cold as it was, snow already a few feet thick, it would take a while for a lake its size to freeze over. “What is this place?”

“Just the corner of a lake that happens to cross boundaries with our property. It forms into a stream several miles that way. It trickles into rivers which then empty into the sea.” Hannibal's voice was quiet, eyes distant, as he watched chunks of ice bob with the current.

“Endless cycle,” Will added as he leaned against the rail beside Hannibal. He watched him from his periphery. “What's on your mind, doctor?”

“The theory of a multiverse.”

Will couldn’t help smiling. “I can honestly say I wasn't expecting that to be your answer.”

Hannibal shrugged, still gazing out at the horizon. “I think of it often. The idea that there are infinite versions of me, of everyone, making the same decisions or choosing different paths. Living in the same circumstances or vastly different ones. I find the idea comforting.”

Will turned his head to look at him fully, sharing his small smile as he understood why he would find appeal in such a idea. “If there are infinite versions of us, then there are an infinite amount of choices that will, and have to, be made. That means there really are no wrong choices any of us can make.”

“Destined and predisposed. I often wonder what other versions of myself are out there, existing at the same time I am—versions of myself stretching back and forward through time. If there is a common thread that binds us all. What things these other versions have done to survive, if they did.”

“Some of you might not be alive?”

“Who can say? There might be a world where I ate my twin in the womb. Or I was the one consumed. In one of these worlds, did I get to keep Nigel? Do I have Mischa in these lives? Is there ever a time I have both? In other worlds, am I left with nothing?” He faced Will, tugging him to stand before him. “How often do I meet you?”

“Who can say?” He repeated Hannibal's question and stepped closer. Ice was forming delicate crystals on Hannibal's eyelashes. His lips were cold when Will kissed them.

* * * * *

The weather grew harsher shortly after their hike. No more walks too far from home. A white-out was a possibility at any time. The days grew relentless in their chill. Ice and snow battered the estate. There was barely a draft slipping through the cracks of the old walls, but Will could hear the wind rattling windows and sweeping down chimney flues.

“Creepy castle on a snowy hill. Howling winds blowing across the moors.”

“We don't have moors.”

“Count Lecter, in his dreary black castle. You could have stepped right out of a Gothic story.” Will stared down at Hannibal who smiled up at him.

It was late into the night. Long after the rest of the Lecters retired to their warm rooms. Past the time Katinka had her middle-of-the-night cry. No one awake but them. Outside, a sliver of moonlight shone down on glittering snow. The firelight reflected off polished wood and shining, priceless trinkets around them. But Will only saw Hannibal. They were in Hannibal's bed. Will would have teased him for his black silk sheets if they didn't feel so good. If Hannibal didn't look so good on them. Sprawled against the pooling material beneath him, flushed and worn in the best possible way. Sweat gathered at the base of his throat. Will admired the image of debauchery Hannibal embodied beneath him.

“Soon, Mischa will have to move up here to her old room. Safe from the coming storm. In my 'creepy, dreary black castle.'” Hannibal's smile widened, teeth catching on flickering flames, as he slid his hands up Will's sweaty flanks.

“She does that every winter?”

Hannibal shrugged as he continued to slide his hands along Will's body. “If she's in the country. It's less stress than trying to get from the cottage to the castle. Safer that way.”

“We could get snowed-in? From the highway?”

“It's happened before. But our pantries are full. The cellar is stocked. We won't have to resort to cannibalism.”

“That's good. I'd be terrible eating.”

“Is that so?”

“I probably taste like carp.”

“I have to strongly disagree. I quite enjoy the way you taste,” Hannibal insisted.

Will could only laugh, the breath knocked out of him, as he was yanked down and flipped onto his back. He decided to lay still. Enjoy whatever the good doctor had in mind. Tickling touches and soft kisses. Searching. Cataloging. He breathed in, deep and shaken, when he noticed Hannibal's lips first at the scar on his forehead, then the nick on his jaw that had yet to completely fade. Will's old scar on his shoulder, collected a lifetime ago as a baby cop, was gifted the same treatment. Hannibal didn't linger. He slid along the length of his body until he was nestled between his thighs, resting against his stomach. He kissed the edges of Will's scar on his abdomen. Pink with freshly healed skin.

Will pushed Hannibal's hair from his face to better see him. “What are you doing?”

“I want to devour you.” Hannibal sucked a bruise onto his naval. He leaned to bite at his hip, pausing for a moment to lay reverent touches over the top of the scar that trailed to almost his knee. “I want to know every part of you.” He nuzzled against the line of Will's Adonis belt. “I want to know you.”

Will hissed, arching off the bed as Hannibal continued tasting and exploring. He couldn't move far. Strong arms held him in place. No room for escape. As if he had the desire for such a thing.

Hannibal pulled away only to whisper, “Where were you born?” His hands and mouth returned to their previous task. When Will's voice rose to something higher than harsh panting and hushed moans, Hannibal stopped his movements. “What was the worst job you have ever had?” Will choked on his laugh when Hannibal didn't give him a chance to reply. He could only take what was given to him, eyes staring up at the shadows that danced across the ceiling. “When did you first fall in love? What is the worst thing you have ever done? What is your greatest triumph? Who was the first to break your heart? What did you want to be when you were a little boy?”

Random and seeking. Trivial and deep. Never time to answer. Hannibal's mouth. Hannibal's hands. Hannibal's fingers. There were no answers Will could give that those things had not already supplied for him. There was nothing in his mind but Hannibal. He could feel the familiar building. The swelling of a monstrous wave. Will grabbed Hannibal by his shoulders, interrupting his interview and conquest.

He smiled, panting against Hannibal's shining lips that looked raw and abused even in the fading light “An archaeologist.” Will felt Hannibal's smile before it pressed to his mouth.

The fire died to glowing coals. Outside, the wind picked up into wailing gales. Snow and ice blew against the windows. A ticking tap on the glass. Jack Frost wanted in. But it was warm in the place they made. In the darkness. Protected and enshrouded. Free to be. Side by side. Entwined. Will pulled Hannibal ever nearer. It wasn't enough. Never deep enough. Could never be as interlocked as he truly wanted. His nails raked down Hannibal's back and neck. From so close he could smell the blood that welled and trickled from ragged lines. Hannibal

encouraged his ruthlessness, pressing into Will's claws as he smothered Will with his own harsh adoration.

When Hannibal collapsed on top of him, gathering him so close he could hardly breath, Will turned his face to Hannibal's neck. Hannibal shivered, his hands bruising Will's flesh, at the feel of lips and tongue tracing the trail of blood along his throat. Hannibal moved only enough to settle against Will's chest. Before sleep stole him away, Will savored the feeling of Hannibal in his arms. Puffs of breath against his sternum. Soft hair slipped through his fingers and tickled his palm as he made some kind of order of his thoughts. The lion slept curled on top of him, content to be marked and watched over.

Will licked his lips. Copper sweetness dried sticky on his tired smile. In the darkness he could admit that he had never tasted anything better. His satisfaction grew as he realized Hannibal would agree. He kissed the top of Hannibal's head. They would need to be cleaned up soon. Cuts shouldn't be left to their own devices for too long. The fire needed to be fed. For now, Will enjoyed the closeness. The blood and breath. The darkness that held him, with Hannibal concealed within it right beside him.

Chapter End Notes

Again, if this was too explicit for M, let me know. I consider this an Intermission. I hope you all don't think it was fluffy filler. My goal was to show how I feel these two characters would be now that they're romantically involved. I hope I accomplished that, while still moving the story forward. I really don't want to get lost in the dreaded multi-chapter Slice of Life genre. :D

I'm still too amused by throwing them in the realm of rom-com while still keeping that underlying intensity and darkness as much as I can. I hope you all enjoyed the chapter. This has all been a really fun challenge.

Thank you to those still coming along with me for this story. I hope you liked this chapter! See you next week!

~CReed

Chapter Ten

Chapter Notes

> Hello, all! The last chapter marked the end of Part Two. Hope you all like the beginning of this new arc. Big thanks to Pia_Pia, Greehatah, Jor_ishere and ropaola for taking the time to leave me such lovely comments. I really appreciate hearing your thoughts and just letting me know you're out there enjoying the story. Please enjoy the next chapter, dear readers!

Act Three:

The Hook

Chapter Ten

In the moments before he completely woke, Will was aware of movement in the room. As silent as it tried to be. The slide of wood against its grain. Rustling fabric. Soft steps against thick Persian rugs. It all pulled Will's consciousness up from the foggy depths of sleep. Nothing worked better, though, than fingertips trailing down his exposed back. Lips settled against his shoulder blade and Will smiled before he rolled over.

It was early. The sky still dim. Stars visible from the window. Will rubbed his eyes and focused on Hannibal. He was dressed and ready for the day, watching as Will gathered his senses. His hand drifted to Will's hip, rubbing the bruises hidden beneath warm sheets. Will glanced past him to take in the set of luggage that was packed and piled in the middle of the room.

“Are you leaving?”

Hannibal leaned to brace his weight on his arm, taking in Will's relaxed form. “I told you once before that I have never been able to predict my Mischa's whims. She has insisted that I join her in the city for a few weeks. Likely before, during and after the first big snow of the season occurs.”

“You're leaving today?” Will reached to slide his hand along Hannibal's forearm. The red silk of his shirt dark as blood in the predawn light.

Hannibal nodded as Will continued to run his hand up and down his arm. “It's too remote here. Mischa wants to be able to access art and culture and any other amusement that takes her fancy. A change of scenery to finish her current book. She does so hate to be confined.” He sighed and settled closer. “The move will benefit me, as well. I still need to decide where to see my patients when I officially become a psychiatrist.” He took up Will's hand to run

kisses along his wrist and palm. “If you pack everything you and Katinka want now, we can leave right after breakfast.”

Will smiled and sat up. “Robertus and Murasaki will be all right on their own?”

“They are, I believe the term you would be familiar with is, 'snowbirds.' They already have plans of their own and will arrange for their departure to warmer climates soon.”

“You want Katinka and I to come with you?” He didn't want to impose, no matter how close they had grown.

“Of course. I don't like the thought of being separated for so long, unable to keep my eye on you.”

Will leaned to pull Hannibal into a kiss. He wrapped his arms loosely around Hannibal's shoulders, toying with the hair that curled against his nape. “Can I bring Mira?”

Hannibal smirked, aware of Will's manipulations but welcoming his attempts to butter him up. “I have made peace with the fact that in order to have you, I need to make room for your dogs, as well.”

* * * * *

The trip took several hours. Into the heart of a bustling world Will had spent so many weeks away from that just looking at the approaching skyline made his anxiety spike. He didn't like living in cities. Too many people. Constant noise. But he got used to it in Bucharest, he would again. He glanced to Katinka in the Bentley's rear-view mirror. It would be a good change for her. New stimulation to experience. Mira was on the backseat beside her, leaning up on front paws to better look out the window.

Hannibal turned onto a residential street and pulled into a paved drive. Enough space for at least two vehicles. Mischa followed soon after. Will noticed where she parked as he took in the house. Houses. Two. One a two-story and the other a three-story. Both inside the same property line.

“These are both your houses.”

“Yes.” Hannibal unbuckled his seat belt as he looked up at the houses. “There are a lot of properties around here with more than one cottage on the acreage.”

Will scoffed and shook his head. “You think these are cottages?”

Hannibal smiled and opened his door. “We've renovated over the years.”

Will was still shaking his head as he followed Hannibal's lead. He shivered once he stepped out of the warmth of the car. Katinka was starting to fuss just as he went to collect her. He was releasing the catches of her car seat when he saw Hannibal approach Mischa to help with her bags. She waved him away.

”No, no. I can handle this. Go get your treasures settled.”

Languages had always come easy to Will. He wasn't a linguist, but it didn't take him long to learn phrases and key words. With enough time and dedication, he could become a fluent speaker. He had a knack for accents, too. In the last weeks of isolation and healing, he hadn't been idle or lax in picking up Lithuanian. Mischa's words translated bit by bit as he worked Katinka's buckles and Will paused in his fumbling when it completely registered what they implied. He knew she meant himself and the baby and he swallowed the emotions that realization brought him, along with Hannibal not denying it. When he stood from the car, Hannibal was there to press a key into his hand.

While Hannibal unloaded the car, Will unlocked the three-story house. He wandered into the foyer with Katinka on his hip, tossed the keys on the table near the door and then froze as he finally took in the “cottage.” The place was ridiculous. Slowly he made his way from one room to another on his search for a bedroom to claim for Katinka. His boots echoed on the shining marble and he could clearly imagine Hannibal's face if he got mud on the rugs or the wood parquet.

Even having spent the past few weeks in an actual castle, the grandiosity of the house was almost overwhelming. He had never stayed amongst such rich surroundings before, let alone was expected to live in a place like this. After he and his dad parted ways, when he settled in Louisiana, his first house was a shack in comparison. A one-bedroom, one-bathroom rental with a little gas-powered kitchen off to a corner. He didn't even have a washer or dryer in those days. It was still too much space than he knew what to do with. His home in Virginia, an actual cottage, had been an upgrade in every way but nothing fancy. He would bet his entire house would have fit twice over inside this one.

When his hunt proved fruitless on the first floor, he started up the gleaming staircase.

Everything was bright. Illuminated to showcase every luxurious detail. From the chandeliers to the floor-length windows. Natural and enhanced light spread to every corner of the house. Will paused in the hallway at one of the windows to appreciate the view. They were now in a more urban area. The neighbors were close. But the backyard was large and surrounded by tall trees. The first door he came to opened into a bedroom all in bright shades of lilac, blue and white. One wall was mostly windows overlooking the backyard. He smiled as he took in the room. It would be different, having Katinka sleep somewhere separate from him, but he couldn't pretend it didn’t please him to think of this room as hers. Her own space to grow into.

Will set Katinka on the bed and began the process of taking her winter wear off. “We have found ourselves in a gaudily decorated *Outer Limits*, Bell.”

He had tossed her jacket and boots on the bed and was contemplating digging her formula and bottle from her bag when the mattress sank behind him. Strong arms slipped around his waist and a cold nose pressed to his throat.

“Do you like the house?” Hannibal rested his chin on Will's shoulder, watching Katinka grab at Will's hands to play with his fingers.

Will chuckled and turned to look at him. “This place is insane. There's a full-size hot tub in a downstairs bathroom. Along with a tanning bed. Why is there a tanning bed in the

bathroom?”

“That's not a bathroom. It's a spa room. I will happily show you the sauna later.” He kissed Will's neck and stood. “I have already bought furniture for Katinka. It should be here tonight. In the meantime, I brought this up for her.” Hannibal gestured to her travel bassinet.

Left to it once more, Will put Katinka's things away before rocking her in the bassinet. It was too early for a bottle. She only wanted to cuddle with her lamb and sleep. When she drifted off, Will turned the lights off and drew the curtains. The baby monitor was fully charged, and Will tucked the receiver into his back pocket. He retraced his steps downstairs to make sure all their bags were where they needed to be. He smiled when he heard scratching at one of the doors. It led to the garage and laundry room. Inside, waiting to be noticed, was Mira.

Will set Mira up in the garage. The space was fully insulated. She would be comfortable, if not a little lonely, her first night or two until he figured out a better place for her. He bought a new bed for her to bring and she plopped onto it as soon as he got it positioned and threw a blanket over it. Later she would need her food and water, a chance to explore the backyard. At the moment she was content to sit in her bed and chew on the toys he tossed her.

He found Hannibal in the downstairs sitting room, lounging on one of the stylish couches with a book. Surrounded by finery. No matter where Hannibal found himself, it was a constant. Sophisticated, modern extravagance or priceless heirlooms from his past. Enclosed in beauty. Armored in splendor. However much at home he was in Castle Lecter, Will knew he was finally looking at Hannibal's more personal touches. His taste for the exquisite was found in everything Will stumbled upon. From the smaller, less ornate, harpsichord in the corner to the Paris chic sofas and embroidered armchairs.

A thought occurred to Will. “You don't live permanently with Robertus and Murasaki. Castle Lecter isn't your home base.”

Hannibal looked up at the sound of his voice and marked his place. “No.”

“Nigel didn’t know whether or not you still stayed with them.”

The mention of his twin didn’t seem to bother him. He only smiled and shrugged one relaxed shoulder. “We were boys just entering college when he left. I did, eventually, move away from my family.”

“Is this where you lived?”

Hannibal, as always, took Will's deductions and questions in stride. “Not here, but a property similar in Vilnius. It was closer to the hospital.”

Will wandered over to the large windows and looked out at the backyard. It was getting darker. Once everything bloomed it would be incredible. Alive and green. “You dismantled everything, rearranged your whole life, to come home and help after the accident.”

Hannibal came to him to drape himself once more against Will's back. He watched Will's reflection in the window. “There wasn't much of a life to rearrange. Nothing I would trade to

regain.”

Will tilted his head to the side, accepting the soft kisses along his neck. “It's easy for you to drop everything. Start over. Begin a new life.”

“As easy as it is for you.” Hannibal trailed his lips upwards until he caught a tender earlobe between his teeth. “Two nomadic souls, calling nothing home but our bodies and memories. Will you join me, if I decide to build my practice here? Stay with me?”

“If that's what you want.”

“It is. You and Katinka. Wherever you are, together. Wherever you go, I want to be there.”

Will said nothing to that. He settled further into his hold and reached up to pet the deep scratches he left on Hannibal's neck. They stood there in the silence of their new home. Katinka still napping. Too early for dinner. In a few hours the moon would rise above the naked trees. For now, Will enjoyed the in-between. The time before the calm inevitably shattered.

* * * * *

The grove was silent, still. No wind disturbed the leaves. No birdsong. No insects calling to one another. Perfect calm. Perfume from bloomed flowers hung thick in the air. The darkness of night did nothing to quell the beauty of this place. It enhanced it, made a whole different world come to life. A mirror of what could be found in the light, but hiding secrets less brave men would never learn for fear of the shadows.

Will watched from these shadows. Content to observe the peaceful scene. In a pool of moonlight, the giant black stag slept. Unafraid. At ease. The keeper of this domain. A surge of disquiet skittered up the back of Will's neck moments before he heard a twig snap in the brush beyond. The stag woke, instantly aware of the change in the forest. This sacred place now disturbed. It rose, pawing at the ground. The feathers wreathing its neck ruffled and shook with agitation. The stag lowered its head, antlers poised to defend.

* * * * *

It wasn't that Will disliked such things. His tastes were eclectic. He found enjoyment in everything from modern rock to the complex notes of hundred year-old symphonies. Poetry or popcorn thrillers. Beauty was beauty and he could appreciate anything if it was well-crafted. However, that didn't make him completely wrong in his assumption for the evening. When Hannibal convinced him to attend an opera with him, he knew it would be entertaining and boring in equal measure.

The music and story were interesting, as were the stage and costumes eye-catching. Will found himself engaged with the opera as much as he was with the man beside him, which was a great amount. Hannibal was moved by the show in a way Will didn't often witness. More than once, Will looked to find tears in Hannibal's eyes as he listened to the incredible notes the prima donna ascended to. Barely aware of anything else but the music.

All together, the evening was well-spent. It was also something Will would have to get used to. They were no longer tucked away at Castle Lecter, basking in the solitude and anonymity such a place afforded. If not with Hannibal, Mischa would insist he join her for similar outings. The life he chose to keep demanded he be seen. The process was already beginning.

As everyone left the auditorium during Intermission, Hannibal was stopped several times to socialize. This was the part Will dreaded. Surrounded by boring rich assholes who attended things like the opera merely because such things were seen as an affluent hobby. A chance to schmooze. A constant contest to tally who had more and where to get whatever caught the covetous eye of high society. And there were plenty of boring, rich assholes to be found. A lot of them approached Hannibal as friendly acquaintances. Will smiled, enjoying the veiled annoyance most conversations caused Hannibal.

Fortunately, Will discovered there were several more lovers of art in attendance than he expected. Fellow artists, and even students, gathered to hear the performance. It reminded Will of the nights in Bucharest when he would join his colleagues at an exhibit or event, or happen to see some of his own students actually take advantage of the interesting hub of culture they lived in.

Will smiled again as Hannibal's hand pressed to the small of his back. They were drawing a small gathering. Friendly faces and loud laughter. Fur stoles and glinting jewels. The crème of the elite. All eager to catch Doctor Lecter's attention. None of them realized that, while Hannibal lived for this kind of thing, he also would have preferred to be left alone long enough to get a drink before the next act. That's what happened when one had impeccable manners. Lucky for Will, that had never been a personal concern.

He leaned close to Hannibal, interrupting the flow of conversation. “I'm going to the bar. Want anything other than champagne?”

“An old-fashioned, thank you.”

And with that, Will abandoned his date to his tedious group of admirers.

He sat at the bar, enjoying the smooth burn of his own whiskey. A smile teasing his mouth. It had been a long time since Will had gone out with someone simply to bask in that person's company. Even longer still was that he enjoyed that person’s company. Ages, if ever, he truly reveled in the evening and all the distractions it could provide. He took his phone out of his pocket to text Mischa and ask after her and Katinka. Someone took the stool beside him. Sweet perfume flooded his senses and he slowly put his phone away before turning his head.

“What are you doing here?”

Freddie Lounds swiveled on her seat to face him, red dress moving to reveal the slit of her flowing skirt that went almost to her hip. An aura of red surrounded her. Glittering and glamorous. Mason's money suited her flamboyant tastes.

She smiled, sizing him up in his tuxedo, and took a sip of her martini. “I figured I gave you enough time to consider all your options. Other than showing up on your doorstep, this seemed the best place to approach you.”

“You've kept close tabs on me.” It went unspoken: she better have taken care not to draw attention to herself.

“Not at all. When it comes to you, I have a method that has yet to fail me.” She glanced around at the swanky music hall. “Follow the money. In this specific case, I followed Dr. Lecter's money.”

Will sighed and downed the rest of his drink. Intermission would end soon. He stood and motioned for Freddie to follow. They weaved through the crowd. No sign of Hannibal. Probably still holding court. Will could only hope he was sufficiently distracted. Freddie stepped into a quiet corridor and Will leaned close, relaxed against the wall. Two friends enjoying the quiet before the next act.

“You've decided what you want. Tell me.”

“I don't know if you're aware, but your bounty is three million dollars.”

“I am. What of it?” Will laughed and shook his head. “Oh, I see. Is this a bidding war?”

“Make me a counter-offer, Will.”

“How much is my life worth to me...You think I have more than three million dollars to hand over.”

“I know you do.”

Any of Will's good humor died. “That's not mine to give.”

“A few million is a drop in the proverbial bucket to the Lecters.”

“I'm not doing that.”

“You've already taken so much from them, what's a very small fraction of their fortune in comparison?”

“You want to rob them, on top of them mourning the loss of Nigel? Jesus, Freddie.”

“They would hardly notice it gone. The money doesn't have to come from them. I just know it's your easiest way out of this.”

“I held no illusions of you being a vulture, but this is beyond your usual greed. Haven't the Lecters paid enough?”

“You haven't. This will come out of their pocket, but your cushy haven will be destroyed after. Won't be able to stick around and cause any more damage after this.” Freddie looked him over again, taking in the bruises that were gone and the scar she could just make out beneath his lengthening curly hair. She leaned closer. “Do you know how Nigel died? Certain details have been kept from everyone, but you know how determined I can be when looking for the truth. He was nearly cut in half. You and his daughter would have died that night, if

not for Nigel literally stopping the debris with his body. If not for you, who knows how long Nigel Lecter would have lived."

Will felt sick. Flashes of the accident surfaced unwanted in his mind. The feeling of despair, unlike anything he ever experienced before, swallowing him as he felt the moment Nigel faded away. The last shred of hope he clung to as he tried to soothe Katinka however he could, whispering that everything would be all right. The warmth that he realized came from the blood that gushed out of Nigel.

He shuttered it all away. Tucked deep and contained so a person like Freddie couldn't use anything further against him. A peculiar sort of calm began to tickle at the back of his head. It crept over him. Slow and thick like molasses to cover his entire being. Only on special occasions did he feel this sensation come over him. It had yet to fail him.

"I'm going to need some time to make all the arrangements, but I'll get you what you want." He heard himself from far away. A part of his personality taking over, using his voice and words to get him through what needed to be done.

If Freddie noticed the change she didn't make it obvious. "I'm glad to hear you're being reasonable. I don't want anyone else to die, even you, as hard as that might be to believe. I don't want the Lecters to suffer any further."

"But all of that will happen, if I don't play along."

Freddie shrugged. "You have a price on your head anyway, Will. Wouldn't you rather pay for my silence than this ending the way Mason has planned for you?"

"And for you."

Freddie chuckled and nodded. "I don't plan to ever cross paths with Mr. Verger again. People who work for him tend to disappear once they've outlived their use."

"He would never uphold the end of his contract. Knowing that, knowing what he's capable of, you still would sell me to him."

"Nothing personal, Will."

"It never is."

"Give me your phone. I'm going to put my number in." He handed it to her and she smiled after a moment and gave it back. "Unlock it, please." A few moments later there was a chiming sound from her clutch. "I'm giving you until midnight tonight to make all the arrangements you need to. We'll figure out where to meet then. This is your best option, Will. If you decide you don't want to do business with me, Mason gets your location and all the information I've gathered on you since you fled the states. And I can't promise that he'll leave the Lecters alone."

Will went back to the bar. Fifteen minutes until they would have to file back into the auditorium. He found Hannibal off to the side of the lounge, blessedly alone for once. His

smile when he saw Will eased the sharp ache that had been gnawing at his insides since Freddie made herself known. Hannibal held his hand out to him, sliding his arm around his waist when he came near enough. Will lifted the old-fashioned out to him and accepted the kiss on his forehead as thanks.

The rest of the evening went faster than Will would have liked. Everything he committed to memory. The lighting, soft and warm. The smell of tobacco and leather, wine and perfume. Surrounded by glamour that would never mean more to him than the joy he saw on Hannibal's face once they returned to their seats and the program began again. Hannibal's hand slid over his at one particular crescendo. Music flowed through and around Will. Rippled on the air.

And Will would not forget any of it. For the rest of his life, this moment would forever be etched into his memory. As solid and vibrant as the calming stream of his mind he often slipped into when reality got to be too much for him. Echoes of the comforting places he had been with his dad now shared shores with the places he made for Hannibal. For Katinka. They would be with him forever. Kept close and treasured.

No thoughts of Freddie or Mason or Margot barged in to steal his attention. What would come could wait. The ache returned but was tinged with a bitter sweetness. An acceptance that held no regret and only the most exquisite kind of pain.

It felt like a goodbye that had yet to be spoken.

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Notes

> Some really great responses last chapter. :) Just want to let everyone know that, while I didn't tag every little detail of the story, I think you all will find the ending satisfactory. Remember, this is "Hannibal" with a rom-com flair. I won't wind you all up and then punch you in the heart guts with nothing to show for it. :D That said, I really love this chapter. It's one of the important ones. ;) Big, sincere thanks to Pia_Pia, Greehatah, Jor_ishere, ilikeexploding, Axelle, brokenteacup, LydiaFearing and predisposed_to_be_happy for taking the time to leave me such beautiful comments. Seriously. Hearing from you, knowing you're still enjoying the story, brings a smile to my face every time I see a new alert in my inbox. The world outside is a shaky place right now. Please stay safe, sane and healthy, dear readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Eleven

Champagne had flowed. Caviar was nibbled on dainty puffs of blynai. At a point in the evening there may have been a dance or two. They stepped through their darkened entryway and before the door closed Hannibal pulled Will into a kiss. Just as he began unbuttoning Will's coat he pulled back. A shrill alarm broke the perfection of the moment and Hannibal made a soft sound of annoyance as he dug in his pocket for his phone.

Will stepped away and hung his coat, taking his gloves off and giving Hannibal privacy. It was late for a call. His tone suggested it wasn't family. When Will turned to him after he hung up he noticed Hannibal made no move to finish what he started. “Everything all right?”

“For me, yes. However, there's been an emergency at the local hospital and I've been called in to assist.”

“How did they know you're available?”

“I let them know when we moved. Since I have yet to fully transition my practice, I'm obligated to help in emergencies.”

“Of course.” Will came to him and slipped his hands inside his coat to rest on his waist. “You don't have time to change out of your glad rags?”

Hannibal shook his head but lingered. “I have a bag in the car for just such occasions.” He pulled Will closer, sighing against his temple before kissing him. “Goodnight.”

Will saw him out, locking up after he watched him drive away. He slumped against the door and took a steadying breath. In a way, it was a turn of luck Will needed. Something drawing

Hannibal away gave Will time to do what he needed without coming up with excuses for wanting to be alone. Though it was needed, it wasn't pleasant. The house was too quiet without Hannibal. His presence a tangible thing to Will that was obviously missing. The emptiness of the big house threatened to grow suffocating without Katinka.

Will texted Mischa to check on Katinka. She was sleeping. It wouldn't make sense to have Will come over at such a late hour to wake her. Mischa insisted she keep her for the rest of the night. Plans for breakfast were happily made. Wishes of sweet dreams sent between them. Will could feel the cravings for a drink gnawing at his insides. But just as he did all those weeks ago in Bucharest, he pushed it aside. He needed to remain alert and clearheaded.

He kept the lights off as he made his way around the house. It would be easier if Mischa thought he went to bed. Finally, with no other options left, Will booted up his laptop and put in all the necessary information needed to sign into the account Margot set up for him. A clammy sickness flopped about in his gut as he looked at the number on the screen. It was enough. Enough to pay Hannibal back for all he provided for him after Will came to stay with the Lecters. Enough to make his way to wherever he needed to run while he waited for Margot to have her baby. Enough to pay off Freddie and have quite a bit left over.

He logged off and disconnected everything to store neatly in one of the compartments of the duffel bag he kept at the back of a closet in one of the guest rooms. A few changes of clothes. His new papers. They would take him where he needed to go. When he was far from Lithuania, settled as much as he could be, he would destroy the documents. Every trace of Gabriel Lecter would be gone. Nothing more than a memory.

Freddie Lounds saw to that.

This could be resolved with payment. Freddie was reckless in some ways, but she wasn't stupid. So many tendrils of serendipity and chance swirled and collided together to make her proposition possible. She wouldn't push after this. But Will didn't want to let this go. He couldn't. In a way, he felt grateful to Freddie. She proved that even with a new name, new home and a new life where he would never want for anything again, he was still Will Graham.

No amount of money, adorable children, supportive family or someone he let closer than anyone else before could change that. His urges and thoughts that inspired them. His morals and his desires. They would never go away. They were ingrained and cultivated a year before and a lifetime ago. It had been a long time since Will planned in such a way and couldn't deny how comforting it was. To once more slip into that special calm. Like stepping into a gentle, quiet stream that was warmed by the sun.

He could pay Freddie Lounds for her silence, but he would rather kill her.

Her fate was sealed the moment she reached out to him. However easy the decision came to him, that did not mean it didn't come with its own price. After this, there would be no going back. The last time he allowed himself to let his tendencies save him set most of the mess he was in into motion. Not that he regretted what he did, but he could be honest with himself in this at least. The nest he had found himself in would no longer be a haven. The Lecters would

become targets. Gabriel Lecter would be tainted. As much a criminal as Will Graham. He refused to bring this all to the Lecters' doorstep.

Everything was going smoothly. He planned for this. Since before Margot came to his house with a bottle of Johnnie Walker Platinum. Since his first set of plans changed the night Margot was supposed to meet him. Since he knew he was on borrowed time as a meek little professor in Bucharest. It shouldn't have surprised him, then, that his momentum almost sputtered out as he finished preparing and had to finally leave the life he *hadn't* planned for.

The thought of not seeing Katinka for a final time nearly sent him stumbling down the stairs. Had he known what the evening held for him, he might have laid in bed all day with her drooling on his chest. Not saying goodbye, getting to hold her one last time, made him want to scream. He had to consciously stop himself from sneaking next door. It occurred to him that he had no pictures of her. No proof aside from his memory that such a perfect little thing had ever shared his orbit. He would be gone from her life. Katinka would grow to not remember him. The thought was crippling, and he had to hold onto the banister as he regained control of his emotions.

He couldn't risk going to Katinka. Mischa would take one look at him and know something was wrong. In the weeks that he had gained a sister, he knew she would try to make everything better for him. She would demand to know his troubles. He had no defense against Mischa. If he mentioned leaving, no matter the stories he concocted, she would keep him from walking out the door. She would alert Hannibal. Or Robertus. And then Will's resolve would crumble.

He went to the desk in the main sitting room. There was stationary in the top drawer. He sat and grabbed one of the fountain pens. As he wrote, the tears that had been pressing at his aching eyes finally fell. As much as he knew it was necessary, he couldn't bring himself to disappear without leaving something behind. The idea that Hannibal would find this waiting instead of him when he came home made bile rise thick and burning to his throat.

The desk lamp was purposefully left as the only light on. It would catch the eye. The first thing Hannibal would notice once he hung his coat. Will read over the letter before making his way to the garage. Mira lifted her head from her paws and gave a sleepy wag of her tail. She came to him at the slightest gesture.

He watched as she ran a few circles of the backyard, doing her business and sniffing at any suspicious rocks. When she finished, Will carried her back to her room and wiped the snow from her paws. She licked his hands and face and Will took a moment to enjoy her sweet playfulness and her puppy breath.

“Be a good girl,” he said when she tried to follow and he was pleased to see her plop back down on her bed at his words. He shut the door on her and grabbed up his things. His keys were left in the dish on the table by the door.

Once outside, Will tossed the bag over his shoulder and started down the street. He didn't take a car, wouldn't even if he could. As soon as they settled here, he looked up nearby streets and bus stops. It wouldn't take long to get into the city center on foot. By cab it would be an

even shorter time to get to the outskirts on the other side. For now, it wouldn't hurt to walk. He'd walked further and in sometimes colder conditions before.

Ten minutes later, Will was several blocks away and the distance between him and the place he had come to think of as home felt like a stab to his soul with every step.

* * * * *

Hannibal,

I wish there was a gentler way to do this. So many times I wanted to confess everything to you. Come clean. Be absolved for the harm I've caused you and your family. But absolution calls for those who have been wronged to forgive, and I can't be forgiven. I would never beg you for your forgiveness, even if I could obtain it. I deserve your hate and your blame. I will take every ounce of it. Anything and everything you would give me I would gladly keep and treasure, even your disdain.

I need you to know that the last few weeks have meant more to me than I could ever put to words. Being with Katinka and Nigel's family filled a place inside me that I never even realized was empty. I would die for her. Kill for her. Her safety and happiness are my first priority and that will never change.

In a few moments more you won't believe me, but I want you to know that I have never loved someone as I love you.

I have never known myself better than when I'm with you. You make everything clear. All the ugly, terrible parts of myself seem so radiant when I'm with you. The things you inspire in me, I wonder if they would appall you? I have a feeling they wouldn't. The things I would have shared with you. I was going to. Whatever happens now, I was going to tell you everything. But I ran out of time, Hannibal, and it's all spiraled too far out of control.

Perhaps it's a blessing that you'll be rid of me.

I have lied to you this whole time, Hannibal. To you and your brilliant family. I am not who you thought I was. My whole existence that you let in, that you allowed close enough to see your exquisite and jagged edges, is a fraud. Gabriel Lecter doesn't exist. He never did. It is because of me that Nigel was killed. Collateral damage. I am going to make this right. As much as I can. When the time comes, and the authorities are no longer holding your brother's remains hostage, please look up Gabriela as one of the missing in the crash. She deserves to be laid to rest with Nigel. Gabi deserves to be honored and remembered as Katinka's mother, as much as Nigel is remembered as her father.

There really isn't more to say after that, is there? No more excuses and no more hiding behind my flimsy reasons. It doesn't matter that I'm sorry. It doesn't matter that I tried to be honest in every way else that I could. Believe me, this is for the best. You deserve something beautiful and terrifying and as dangerous and wonderful as you. Not me.

Don't try to find me. Don't look for me. Don't waste your time wondering where I am, or what I'm doing. Don't think about me.

Goodbye, Hannibal.

* * * * *

The rain started shortly before Will made it into the center of the city. It wasn't the kind that hid sleet within the fat drops of water, but it was cold and the wind had picked up into a good bluster. By the time he hailed a taxi to take him where he needed to go, he was soaked through. He was taken to one of the shadiest motels he'd ever been. The woman in the office barely looked at the dripping foreigner who paid in cash for a few days' rent.

Now Will watched the growing storm from the grimy window of his room. Fresh change of clothes and marginally warmer. He had to bang on the ominous little wall heater now and again to lessen the chill. The cracked clock on the wobbly nightstand read thirty minutes to midnight. He took the phone out of his pocket and turned it on. No missed calls. A slight relief. Soon the sound of ringing filled his ear before the static of a connection clicked.

“Will.”

“It's all ready, Freddie. Just need to come get it and you'll be a rich woman.” There was silence on the other end that had Will smiling. It was too late to back out. She should have been more careful of what she wished for, of what she invited in. “Unless you've changed your mind?”

“No,” she piped up but there was still a trace of wariness in her voice. “I'm surprised you actually followed my suggestion. Took the easiest way out of all this.”

“The easiest choice I could make, given the circumstances,” he agreed.

“You have it all?”

“Are you expecting a suitcase full of money to handcuff to your wrist? I have what you want, don't worry.”

“Good. The place you're—”

“As soon as we hang up, I'll send you the directions of where to meet. This is the only thing I insist on. You've put us both in a lot of danger, approaching me the way you did. I have to have some sort of safety net in all this.”

“Fair enough. Don't try anything, Will.”

“I could say the same for you, Freddie.”

The connection ended and Will typed up the directions. All that was left to do was wait. He sighed and slumped down onto the foot of the bed. The only light came from the dull bulb in the bathroom. Hardly any cars past by on the lonely highway. When they did, the flooding parking lot would be washed in blinding light for a few seconds before once more becoming enveloped in darkness.

Will leaned his head back and closed his eyes. His pulse wasn't climbing. Panic didn't stir in the pit of his stomach. Dread didn't make sweat prickle along his arms or create a clammy sheen on his forehead. It never felt like that to him. Not that he felt overly confident about any of this. He was improvising as he went along, at this point. Honestly, if he made it out of this alive he would be shocked. But even that thought didn't send him shivering.

There was a certain kind of comfort in the finality of it all. He wouldn't hesitate. He wouldn't plead or beg. What he planned for Freddie needed to be done. And Mason would get his due, as well. Ugliness taken out of the world. Balance restored. He would have liked to stay a little longer, but if he went with them, so be it. A brand of justice he personally dealt. A permanent mark he would leave behind.

A knock came at the door. The clock now read fifteen minutes until two. Will frowned as he went to the door. For wanting this transaction, Freddie wasn't very punctual. He paused before he grabbed the doorknob. The hairs on the back of his neck rose but his reaction wasn't from fear. He hadn't heard a car. No tell-tale flash of headlights to tip him off. He opened the door and took a few steps back.

Hannibal was silent as he stepped over the threshold. The most dressed down Will had ever seen him. Gone was the tuxedo from earlier. Dark jeans, dark sweater. His brown peacoat was speckled with rain. The scarf hanging from his neck was one Will left behind. He turned his back on Will to shut the door, gloved hand making quick work of the locks. When he came to stand before him, Will could see tiny drops of water collecting at the ends of his damp hair.

“I take it you read my note.”

“I did. And then I burnt it.”

It was strange. Will had never heard Hannibal like this before. Always quiet, but this was different. Misleading. Something slithered beneath that hushed calm. Menacing. Will had never heard this version of him, and yet he felt like coming face to face with an old friend. Someone he had been waiting for. Someone he kept seeing out of the corner of his eye but always too late to catch. The inevitable meeting with Death.

“Destroying possible evidence?” Hannibal only smiled at that as he started taking off his gloves to stow in his pocket. Will's calm finally started to erode. The sight of the man before him, in this place and this moment, ruining all his effort in tamping down his sorrow in seconds. “You were supposed to let me go.”

“I can't do that. Too many people would miss you.”

They shared a smile at the thought of those waiting for them unaware of what was about to unfold. Will swallowed the emotions threatening to choke him. “Where's Bell and Mischa?”

“Still sleeping, I should think.” He took a step closer, barely an inch between them. “Come home.”

“I can't. You know I can't.”

Hannibal shook his head, a touch of a smile lingering on his lips. “You are always overthinking. Whatever you are allowing to cloud your thoughts now, stop. I can help.” He took Will gently by the jaw and leaned ever closer, nuzzling at his hairline. “Let me help you, once more.”

Will denied him even as he pressed into his touch. “How can you still want me, knowing what I did to you and your family?”

“It is rather inconvenient, the feelings you invoke and inspire in me. However, I cannot place blame entirely at your feet. And I can still want you very easily. In your own way, you've always told me the truth, just as I have done for you.”

“There's more than that. So much more you don't know. I have so much blood on my hands. I'm drowning in it.”

“What happened to Nigel and Gabi isn't your fault.”

Will laughed, raspy and teasing. “I'm not talking about them, Dr. Lecter. I've killed people other than those innocent bystanders on that damned train. In a much more direct, hands-on way. In complete control of my mind and actions. It's not the same as what you did when you were a boy. It's not just survival for me. That excuse can only work to a certain point. I like it. I enjoy every opportunity I get to dole out punishment to those who deserve it. Doing bad things to bad people makes me feel good. And I'm not going to stop. In fact, I'm going to do it again, very soon.” He was shaking, tears spilling free as he clutched at Hannibal's coat. Maybe now he understood. Maybe now Hannibal would look at him the same way most people who had the misfortune of getting too close did. “Am I worth helping now, Hannibal? Am I worth keeping? Close to everyone you love? In your bed?”

Hannibal pulled him into his arms, petting through his hair and shushing his quiet sobs. He sighed as he rested his cheek against the top of Will's head. “I was wondering when you would tell me. I hoped one day you would feel safe enough to share all those dark and lovely secrets, fluttering around inside your head like black butterflies. Of course I still want to help you.” He kissed his head. “I know it's hard. I know it hurts. But you need to trust me, Will.”

Time stopped. There was nothing. No sound. No sensation of any kind. A sort of numbness. Will swallowed, his body wracked with sudden tremors, and he placed his palms flat against Hannibal's chest. He could feel the steady beat of his heart beneath his touch. Calm and rhythmic, Will's hammering pulse slowed to match in answer. He looked up, still within the circle of Hannibal's arms.

Hannibal watched him, head tilted in curiosity as he took in Will's stance. There was a trace of moisture on his cheeks as if a tear or two escaped his usual tight control. Will could destroy his control so easily. And he had hurt him. With words unspoken and lies and running from him. But there was forgiveness in his eyes, shining from the hazel depths as glimmering as the tears trapped in his lashes. One hand rose to splay across Will's neck. So much hidden strength within. The potential to heal as well as harm.

Hannibal smiled at his shock, thumb brushing over the pulse he felt jump beneath his touch. “Or do you prefer 'Aiden Teague?' Though, if you were to ask me, I like 'Will Graham' the

best.”

Once more, that blessed calm washed over Will. Stopping his tears, easing his trembling. It came off Hannibal in waves that he drank up, absorbed. An endless loop of feedback, circling out and in. Currents of calm energy that lapped against his rocking boat. A steady force. The anchor he counted on when he was untethered. His paddle in the chaos.

He didn't step back from Hannibal's hold when he finally recovered his voice. “How long have you known?”

“That question has several answers.”

“Then give me all of them.”

Hannibal only smiled at his demand. “I knew from the moment I saw you that you couldn't possibly belong to Nigel. I knew when you woke up and immediately clung to Katinka, as if she were your path to atonement, that I was missing too many details to act on my suspicions. I knew, after having the privilege of your company for only a few days of complete coherency, there was so much more to you than the timid, harmless man you prefer the world to see. I have known, unequivocally, for almost four weeks now that you didn't kill my brother.”

“If I had?” Will didn't really have to ask.

“Then our relationship would have progressed differently.”

“Perhaps down that particular path in another universe.”

“Perhaps, but not to be in this life.” Even now, stripped bare and raw, they smiled at their shared memories.

The time gave Will pause and he studied the smirk flickering on Hannibal's lips. There was a glint in his eyes that Will couldn't quite pinpoint the meaning. Excitement. Amusement. As if he was waiting for Will to catch on to something. Always waiting for Will to see. And then it clicked. The beginning of an epiphany he hadn't quite took a firm hold of yet. To mention the timeline had to have some sort of significance to Hannibal. It did to Will.

“You found out I didn't kill Nigel sometime right after your retirement party. That's why you were gone. Meeting a private detective or investigator.”

“Do you think I wouldn't look into your past?”

“Always so curious.”

“Insatiable, especially when it comes to you.” Hannibal wrapped his arms tighter around his waist. “The people I paid outrageously well found me a number of interesting things. However, the most crucial leads came by chance. One was a young man. He was understandably distraught, but such a thing does not excuse rudeness. He mistook me for Nigel, accused my family and I of doing something nefarious to Gabi, among other things.”

“Charlie.”

“He did not speak fondly of you.”

“I'll bet.” There was something else. Something slipping by his comprehension. Shadows beneath rippling waves that eluded him the more he searched them out. He was too annoyed to think more on the puzzle. That would have to wait. He'd return to Charlie eventually. Will shook his head at the thought before leaning forward to rest his forehead against Hannibal's shoulder. “I gave him a chance to not make any more trouble and he did the exact opposite. He could have put you in danger.”

“I wouldn't expend further energy on him. He won't cause you, or anyone else, trouble again.” When Will made a questioning hum into the soft leather of his coat, Hannibal returned his hand to Will's hair. He toyed with the damp curls at the back of his neck and laid his cheek against his temple. “Unfortunately for him, Charlie chose not to take your warning to heart.”

Images and sensations came to Will as fresh as the night it happened. Will slipped from Hannibal's arms and went to the window. He stared out at the rain as he gathered his thoughts. Hannibal didn't speak, didn't follow to retrieve him. He wouldn't. This was for Will to figure out on his own. To do with what he would. It was all for Will.

All of it had been for him.

Even now, Will could taste the silky meat that practically fell apart at the slightest touch of his fork. Dripping with a kind of sauce he hadn't had since his life in Louisiana. Detail upon detail upon detail. So many unspoken hints and clues. Desperate to be understood. A fresh kill. The threat to Will dealt with efficiently and cleanly. Served to him on a platter, accompanied by a comfort from his home.

“A tribute,” Will murmured to his reflection in the spotty glass.

“An offering.”

Will could see. As if he had been the one to cut Charlie's chest open to take his prize himself. “Grief can transform us into the ugliest versions of ourselves. A heart is no good if it's broken beyond repair. What use had he of it now? Wasted and damaged. You repurposed his heart. Turned something ugly into beauty once more. A show of skill. And a promise. Your love is vicious, and stronger than the blubbering fool's you slaughtered. You would do anything for your intended.” Will came back to the present and took in a shaking breath as something else occurred to him. “You haven't called me 'Gabriel' since that night.”

“I couldn't bear to. You may have to pretend to the world, but you don't have to pretend with me.”

“And I never did, not where it counts. Not any of you.” Will came back to stand before Hannibal. “What was your other promising lead?”

Hannibal smiled and said, “Yet another perfect alignment of circumstances. You and Miss Lounds were so embroiled at the pier, neither of you noticed when I went to find you.”

“Eavesdropping? How inelegant,” Will teased.

Hannibal shrugged and offered nothing of an apology. “It's not the most uncouth thing I've ever done. I saw you talking intimately with a woman from the shop window. I couldn't let such an opportunity pass. It wasn't hard to find out more about Miss Lounds, keep an eye on her.”

“I'm sure she had some interesting things to tell you.”

“Half-truths and fabrications. Her value wasn't in the information she could give. It was more important that she remain in the dark about me.”

“Easier to hunt if everyone thinks you're a naïve, rich doctor.”

“Caught in the honey-trap of my brother's alluring widow.”

Will scoffed. “Oh, I'm sure she had plenty of those kinds of warnings.”

“A few. I only officially met her tonight. After I saw her with you at the symphony hall, I knew she most likely contacted you to finally issue her demands. One way or another, her reappearance would make you vanish and I couldn't let that happen. I apologize if I spoiled your plans, but you will no longer be meeting with Miss Lounds.”

Will rubbed roughly over his eyes and through his hair. Suddenly he felt exhausted. Body and spirit. “I had it under control, Hannibal. Everything was close to being finished. This is exactly how I didn't want things to end.”

“I disagree. This was the only resolution there could be.”

“Whatever she told you, I wasn't going to pay her. Let alone with your family's money. This wasn't your problem to fix. I didn't want you to have to pay her off.”

Hannibal breathed a small laugh. “I didn't pay her off.”

“What did you do?”

“I simply took care of another pest. If you're worried about a trail left behind, there isn't one. As I told you before, I have perfected over the years all the ways to use every bit of the animals I slaughter.” Hannibal's humor disappeared and he stepped closer, hands twitching at his sides as if he wanted to reach for Will but unsure if his touch would be accepted. “Do you think I would let anyone threaten you? Take you away from Katinka? Separate you from me? Charlie and Miss Lounds, they do not begin to cover the lengths I would go to for you. I would reduce this world to rubble and lay the remains at your feet if you asked it of me. I love you, Will.”

Will yanked him into his hold and Hannibal yielded to him. Every harsh kiss he accepted as if starved for touch and taste. Will grabbed handfuls of his hair and ran his lips across his jaw. It

was a heady, irresistible feeling. To know a man like Hannibal wanted him. Loved him. Will Graham was nothing. A shadow of what was *supposed* to be. A disturbing curiosity no one could be around for too long. He felt too much. He saw too much. He understood, accepted, practiced things considered taboo and wrong in polite society.

And Hannibal was everything he wasn't, would never have dared to develop into. The monster everyone feared. Elevated and transcended. Grotesque and primal. Other. A fallen angel trapped among the vapid drones of mankind. Will adored him. The terrible pieces of his soul fit so well with Hannibal's. How did he ever think he could walk away from this? How could he abandon the man and his understanding? Ignore or deny the offer of becoming something more than what he was now?

“Say it again.” Will's grip on Hannibal's hair tightened as he hissed into his ear. “Tell *me*.”

Hannibal caught on quickly, leaning into the painful touch. Panting, he forced out what Will wanted to hear. “I love you, Will. Always only you, Will. Always.”

Will clutched him tighter, demanding everything Hannibal had and receiving more than he thought possible. In return, he gave Hannibal all of himself. Everything they longed for. A rush of blood throughout his body. Like missing time but hyper-focusing on every millisecond. No barriers between them. No more hiding or lying. Bared completely and finding nothing but welcome and hunger at the sight of each other's hideous forms beneath all the glamour.

In bits and pieces Will returned to himself. Panting humid breath against feverish skin. The richness of blood teasing his tongue after a kiss that was too hard, too fervent. Naked, perfect skin splitting apart under his clawing nails. Will laughed, bright and debauched as he gathered Hannibal closer. They were moving together, always as one. Hannibal knelt on the lumpy mattress, worshipful and near-dazed as he clung to him. Will kept him as close as possible. Deep enough inside to assuage the terrible ache being apart from Hannibal induced in him, the thought of never being near him again.

Will had been talking the entire time, whispering every dark thought he had. All the terrible wishes he wanted for them. Hannibal shivered at each confession, holding Will tighter. “You're my family, Hannibal. All I'll ever want. You and the baby. Our baby. Our family. The things I'll do to keep you...I'll never let you go now.”

Hannibal took up Will's hand to run kisses across his knuckles and palm, biting at his wrist. “Whatever there is in you that Katinka hasn't claimed, is mine. You're mine. You belong to me. Marry me.” His grip became bruising and Will cried out in equal measures of pleasure and pain. He groaned when Will masked his discomfort by sinking his teeth into his shoulder, shivering as blood trailed down his back. “Marry me, Will.”

Will could only nod, his affirmation to the demand a soundless gasp against Hannibal's rapacious mouth.

Death was still close. Skirting the edges of the shadows. Watchful. Voracious. Ready to take Will. He could feel it. Looming and creeping. Wanting everything he held dear. But it was

different now. Everything was different from their last encounter. Whatever happened, whatever came for him, he was no longer alone.

Will's head fell back and his eyes drifted closed. An ache so sweet it left tears trailing down his temples reverberated out of the core of him throughout his body. A smile crept along his bloody lips as delicate kisses were pressed along his throat.

No. He wasn't alone anymore.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter has been planned, drafted and worked on since the beginning of the story. There are some details that I kept similar to the movie that I worked into this plot. I don't want to spoil the movie, so I'll leave it at that. It's been my intentions from the start to have a moment where there's not so much a "big reveal" but a defining moment where Will and Hannibal are no longer hiding from each other. There are still things they don't know, but now it's all out in the open. There are no veils between them. I like the idea that these two have finally shown each other what lies behind their pleasant facades and they both found that what is there happens to be just another mirror. They are so similar, complimentary--even their monstrous sides. I hope I got that across even a little bit. I really hope everyone reading enjoyed this chapter. :D

At this point, I hope it's understood that if you feel this is more than an M story let me know and I'll up the rating. I don't think so, personally. Intense but not explicit--or at least that's what I was going for. The same goes for when the story becomes more violent. Thanks for stopping by and I hope you like what comes next! ;)

~CReed

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Notes

> I'm so glad you all enjoyed that last chapter. Bear with me for this one, okay? :) Big, gooey, sentimental thanks to Pia_Pia, Jor_ishere, ropaola, EmilyElm, ellethom, Axelle, ns100, predisposed_to_be_happy, El Escritor Celoso, LydiaFearing, Ruthless330, missydogblog and Psycho_Serendipity for taking the time to leave such kind and lovely comments. Hearing from you, telling me what you think of the story thus far, is such a joy for me. I really appreciate it. Please enjoy the next installment. I hope you're all staying safe, sane and healthy, dear readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twelve

Will felt like he should have a cigarette.

All the times they had been together, Will never indulged in this. Everything was still considered new between them, but Will couldn't remember another time he watched Hannibal dress. As of yet, Will was always still asleep to witness this moment. Hannibal had no office to go to in the mornings. There were no sleepy fumblings before dawn. Selfish luring back into bed as ties and shirts were slipped off once more. No rushed kiss goodbye after breakfast. He had a hard time imagining Hannibal rushing for anything.

From where he sat propped against the wall behind the hotel bed, he watched. A ritual in its own right. The process of hiding. Masking. Covering the vulnerable flesh and blood of a man who was never actually vulnerable, naked or not. Hannibal turned, pausing as he noticed Will staring before zipping up his jeans. Getting caught didn't stop Will, eyes trailing over Hannibal's frame, unabashedly taking in the view of his broad chest and corded shoulders. There came a smirk that vanished beneath the soft wool sweater he pulled over his head.

Will sighed as Hannibal became buried beneath layers of fabric and propriety. A shame. He glanced down at himself, tangled in the scratchy sheet, and found his skin pebbled with the chill of the room. Unfortunately, it would seem something other than his birthday suit would be better in the growing cold. The desire to move was less than zero.

Hannibal came to sit beside him, placing the pile of his own clothes on his lap. He rubbed Will's arm, allowing the friction to bleed warmth into the cool flesh before he leaned to kiss Will. He pulled away, tugging on a curl that fell into Will's eyes. “We should start getting ready to leave, Will.”

As Will pulled on his own jeans and thermal shirt he prepared for what could possibly become their first real argument. “I'm not going home with you. I can't.” Hannibal stopped

adjusting his scarf and only stared back at him, waiting. He didn't seem hurt by the declaration, at least. Will came closer, tugging lightly on the ends of the soft flannel around his neck. “Pests taken care of or not, this isn't finished.”

“I know. We're not going home.” Hannibal sat on the edge of the bed to put on his shoes. “I texted Mischa after I found your letter. I told her you had a family emergency and I was accompanying you on your way. We don't know how long we'll be. I told her at least two days. Just in case.”

Will knelt to tie his bootlaces and could barely understand the growing anger he felt. “My view of you has slightly shifted in the last few hours, I'll admit, but I still didn't ever want this for you, Hannibal.” He looked up and met Hannibal's steady gaze. “I left because I was trying to *keep* you from unnecessary harm.”

Hannibal shook his head, sharp smile glinting in the dull light, as he finished dressing. “There is no 'keeping from' when it comes to us. A part of you has always known I can handle all the secret things you try to hide. Just as I have come to understand that you will join me with what I do in the shadows.”

“Maybe it's not about you being able to 'handle' anything. Maybe I didn't want to risk your life. God knows I have enough Lecter blood on my hands.”

Hannibal's smile turned to something softer as he watched Will with a mix of amusement and adoration. He lifted his hands in a small, flourishing shrug. “And there you have it. My reason for not only coming to collect you, but my ultimate goal at this moment.” He stood and helped Will to his feet. “Miss Lounds was just a symptom. I have every intention of seeing the cause eradicated.”

Will nodded, seeing Hannibal's train of thought—at least one of them, anyway. “Freddie was working for Mason Verger, whom you found out about once you officially met her.”

The humor faded from Hannibal's eyes. “Mason Verger, in his efforts to obtain you, killed my brother.”

“He is now both of our problem.”

“Yes, and I am going directly to the source of it. Or, I should say, he will be coming directly to me.” Hannibal went to the window, watching the silent parking lot. “Miss Lounds never intended on you eluding Mason. She was always going to give you to him.”

“I know.”

“To give herself a chance to escape, she had an alert set to send Mason your location once she was safely away. I didn't see the need to change her plan, as meeting Mason is my goal.”

Will heard the sound of tires coasting into the parking lot. The room lit up for a moment, illuminating the twitch of a smile at the corner of Hannibal's mouth. He stepped away from the window and came to Will. Nothing spoken, only a glimmer to his eyes and Will understood. Two predators, with two different styles of killing, now hunted together. He

traced the line of Hannibal's jaw with gentle fingers. They kissed as a car door opened and slammed shut. Several sets of footsteps ran along the pavement outside. One last smile against Hannibal's mouth before the door burst open.

They both jumped, clutching one another as five men entered the room. Will had to bite his lip to keep from laughing as Hannibal moved in front of him, shielding him from their guests. Hannibal immediately started to yell at the intruders, demanding to know who they were and what they wanted. His Lithuanian no longer a lilting rhythm but clipped and harsh. The only time Will had ever heard him raise his voice. All a show. Another round of theater.

One man stepped forward and smiled. “Good evening. Sorry to have startled you. I didn't know our friend here would be entertaining.” His accent was a rumbling kind of brogue. Irish, if Will had to guess.

Hannibal stepped further in front of Will, blocking the man's view. “You have the wrong room. We were just leaving.”

The man gave Hannibal a tight grimace of a smile, as if trying to be polite but not having the patience for it, before looking over his shoulder at Will. “I've been sent on an annoyingly long chase for you, Will. Please don't make this any harder than it needs to be.”

“You not only have the wrong room, you have the wrong person. Please, be on your way and we'll do the same.” Hannibal took Will's hand and tried to step around their visitor.

A gun cocked and was suddenly raised to Hannibal's head. “We are on a tight schedule, Mr. Graham. The longer you play at this, the more my temper might get the best of me.”

Hannibal flinched and turned his face slightly from the barrel but he didn't move away from Will. Instead, he took a step back and pulled Will further behind him. Will didn't want to press their luck. They hadn't shot Hannibal yet so he must have been of some interest. Still, there was only so long until these people used force. As much fun as this was, playing the same game as Hannibal, there was no need to drag it all out even further.

“All right!” Will raised his hands and came forward, stepping into the line of the gun. “You have me. I'll come with you. Just—”

“Gabriel?”

It was strange hearing that name from those lips. He only now realized how much he loved not hearing Hannibal call him that. Will slowly turned his back on his bounty hunters and what he found floored him. Hannibal looked so confused.

“What is he talking about?” Hannibal's voice was hushed, realization draining the color from his features. “I was right, wasn't I?”

“No.”

“From the very beginning.” Hannibal's laugh was a terrible, ugly thing. “You lied. About everything.” A shocked kind of horror filled his words. There was a sheen to his eyes. Tears

welled along his lashes. Overachiever.

If Will hadn't been in love before, he was now. And when this was all over, he was going to marry the shit out of this man. He couldn't describe the giddiness he felt. Knowing what no one else did. Was this how Hannibal felt all the time? No wonder he was constantly amused. “Not everything. Please, I—” He was pulled back, arms tugged behind him to be restrained. When they made a grab for Hannibal he made a show of struggling. “He has nothing to do with this! Just take me! Mason only wants me!”

The leader of the hunting party stepped in front of Will. “Normally, I would agree. I don't care who you pretend to be *every fucking time you run*. I don't care who you fuck in the meantime, for that matter. I'm not paid to care. However, Mr. Verger became aware of the good doctor you've been playing house with and paid extra for his delivery. So.” He shrugged and signaled his men to escort them out.

They were deposited into the back of an SUV. No bags over their heads. No blindfolds. Nothing but plastic ties biting into their wrists. They didn't try to get away. The whole point was to be taken. In the seconds they were alone, Will leaned into Hannibal. He tilted his head to lay a kiss on Hannibal's shoulder. Hannibal turned and inhaled the scent of his hair. They didn't speak. No promises. No expectations. No plans other than ending all of this soon. Hannibal slumped over towards the window when the driver's door opened, waves of distress and heartbreak rolling off him.

It was a silent ride.

* * * * *

Their trip wasn't very long. A little over three hours. They turned down a bumpy dirt road. Trees thick around them and heavy snowfall adding to the already substantial layers on the ground. A weathered old farmhouse appeared out of the trees ahead. If it weren't for other vehicles, Will would have thought the place abandoned. They rolled to a stop and both men up front got out. Will and Hannibal were alone once more.

Hannibal leaned close. “We're in Latvia.”

Will nodded, watching as the leader argued with a figure standing in the house's entrance. Warm light glowed from behind them. Movement from deeper within. A full house. There was light in the barn across a snowy pasture as well. A few figures could just be seen against the shadows beyond, puttering around while they waited for whatever that was happening to start. Fifteen men, maybe more.

The man came back to the car, stomping through the snow. He opened the back door and pulled Will out. He was dragged up to the house and put on display.

“Proof enough?” He had Will by the elbow and shook him for observation.

The man in the doorway came forward. He was tall, big. A polite smile on his face as he examined Will. He looked once again to his abductor. “Had to make sure. Mason doesn't want any more mistakes made, you understand?”

“*Mason* is the one who sent me the last fucking lead. If I got that wrong, the problem's not on my end. And I'm not the one who's been making 'mistakes.'”

“Of course. If you'll bring Mr. Graham inside, please.”

“No. I'm answering the terms of the bounty. I've brought Graham, and his doctor, in alive. That's where my contract ends and you'll pay me now.” He smiled as the other man's pleasant demeanor faded. “Let's all not pretend to be ignorant of how your employer is when it comes to skipping out on bills and working with people who mysteriously end up dead after jobs. I'm not some amateur rando he usually deals with. Complete my transaction now, and I'll give you what you want.”

He seemed to think over his options. They could all start shooting at each other, but why ruin whatever Mason planned? Finally, he dug a phone out of his coat pocket and began typing away. After a few moments, he looked to the man holding Will. “All done. You can check, if you like.”

The bounty hunter did just that, nodding when whatever came onto his phone's screen met his expectations. He released his grip on Will and signaled for the man with him to collect Hannibal. He turned to Will. “Goodbye, Mr. Graham. It was a fucking nightmare tracking you down.”

Before he left, he looked Will over and then watched as Hannibal came without putting up any resistance. A considering kind of light came into his eyes but he only gave Will a slight nod before heading back to his car. A few men surrounded Will and Hannibal as they were beckoned inside. It was instantly warmer past the threshold. The house wasn't renovated like Castle Lecter. The dereliction of the place merely covered by expensive décor. Will came back to himself when a hand clamped down on his shoulder. Hannibal was treated the same as they were pulled from each other. Will stepped towards Hannibal when the man who paid for him blocked his way.

“Mason wishes for the two of you to be prepared for the evening.” He smiled, polite and friendly, as he looked Will over. “Something a little more formal for dinner.”

Will wanted to argue that it was already morning but knew nothing would change Mason's plans. He sighed as he was pushed into a bedroom on the ground floor while Hannibal was herded upstairs. Mason lived for flashy villainy to the point where it all became almost comical. Will had forgotten how exhausting he could be. It would work in his favor.

It always did.

Mason had yet to learn that the priority was neutralizing one's target. He had to play first. That gave Will an advantage. Sadists were so boring. Mason was predictable. It seemed he hadn't learned his lesson. Mason's henchmen were rough as they stripped him and shoved him into a suit. Navy blue with a striped silk shirt. Polished shoes. A pocket square. Silk tie tight around his neck. Will didn't fight, barely kept from rolling his eyes, when they strapped him into one of the heavy antique dining chairs at the table. They left him just enough wiggle room to reach his place setting.

Hannibal was already there, restrained as Will was. At the opposite end of the table. From where Will sat in the middle, he could see that Hannibal was wearing a suit of his own. Brown and gold pinstripe. No bursts of color or flamboyant patterns. Definitely not what he preferred. He looked around the room in curiosity and they shared a small smile when their eyes met, Hannibal's a faint twitch that Will was used to deciphering. Then there were footsteps behind Will and a voice that made his skin crawl.

“Good evening, gentlemen. I hope you weren't waiting too long.” Mason Verger set his hand on Will's shoulder, smoothing out non-existent wrinkles, before he came to sit at the head of the table. He looked Will over, eyes shining with amusement. “You look rather dashing for a man who was supposed to have died.”

“And you sound surprisingly articulate for a man who has no face.”

In the candlelight and flames from the old hearth, he could see Mason clear enough. The last seven and a half months had been kind. From his forehead to the bridge of his nose was the same as when Will first met Mason. Turquoise eyes framed by dark lashes. A constant mischievous glint to them. The only one entertained by the cruel games he forced everyone around him play. Soft, unblemished skin that only the supremely wealthy ever had. Pale from a pampered life in the northern United States. Still fond of the unruly hairstyle that always reminded Will of a feather duster. Dressed to display his wealth and elite breeding.

But it was the lower half of his face that was striking. Really showcased the kind of man he was. From midway down there was nothing but lumpy scar tissue. A mix of shades lighter and darker than his skin tone. His nose was gone, though grafts had created a fleshy nub to replace it. Gave his face some sort of definition.

He still spoke in that annoying drawl that always irritated Will's more Southern roots. As if Mason had sauntered out of an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel. Now his words came out gruffer, every syllable purposefully enunciated. His mouth was a lipless, doughy hole and Will wanted to smile at the memory of just how all this misfortune befell poor Mason.

A plate was set before Will, the man from earlier not bothering with friendliness any longer. “Yes, he is. And he will only recover further with more grafts and transplants.”

“This is Cordell, Will. Brilliant doctor. He's done some miraculous things over the past few months. With my funding, and his ability to not let little things like ethics and laws stand in his way, he has turned the mess you made into a work of art.”

Cordell smiled at Mason and set a plate before him as well. “That's kind of you to say, Mason. It's been a pleasure working with you.”

Will looked down at his plate. Some sort of shellfish. Accompanied with mounds of whipped sauces and relishes. He looked around once more, taking everything in. The furnishings were old, rich. The smell of mildew and rot beneath. A broken old stage made garish to suit Mason's tastes. A show of wealth and status, even at the last minute. A message. He could get anything, make anything happen. His money allowed him access to whatever, whomever, he wanted.

He studied Mason as he carefully sipped his glass of wine. It was much harder to do without lips. “You must be so proud that you could pull all this off,” Will interrupted Cordell as he explained his recipe to Hannibal.

Mason took his time chewing. It was a surreal thing, watching a faceless skull smile. “Very. After that botched attempt to nab you in Romania, I knew you might be somewhere still around this part of the old world. I would rather have shipped you up to the farm, Will, but this one is doing rather nicely for what I have in mind.”

“You bought and furnished an old farmhouse on the chance I *might* still be in the country.”

“A bit like playing a global version of 'Pin the Tail on the Donkey,' but I was rather close in my guess. If Lounds had been better at her job, I would have known exactly. Still, she came through in the end. Finally filled me in on all the juicy tidbits of what you've been up to.” Mason finally looked to Hannibal who had been watching the whole exchange with what seemed to be horrified fascination. “So nice to meet you, Dr. Lecter. Mason Verger, of Verger Meat Packing and Processing—and now specialty breeding.”

“Romania?” Immersed in his current role of being stricken, Hannibal's voice was barely above a whisper. Shell-shocked and afraid. He took his time, appearing to order the thoughts he already had a firm grasp on. “You had something to do with the crash.”

“I do apologize for any inconvenience that caused you. Can't get quality help hardly at all these days! But if you're looking for someone to blame for your family’s misfortunes, look no further than your little bed-warmer here.”

“Gabriel—Will—wouldn't do something like that.”

“Are you sure? Up until a few hours ago, you thought he was someone else.” Mason smiled as he dabbed the corner of his mouth with his napkin. Glee and excitement sparking in his manic eyes. “You have no idea who he really is. A deranged psychopath. Cold-blooded.” He motioned towards his face with a manicured hand. “Your darling's handiwork. Left me to die, in my family's own pig pens, after he killed eleven people. Who knows what sick and twisted things he did to my twin, Margot. God rest her poor, heathen soul. They haven't found her body yet.”

Will rolled his shoulders, relaxing his posture as much as he could bound to his chair. He didn't spare Hannibal a glance as he looked over Mason and couldn't help smirking. It was nice not having to pretend to be horrified or ashamed of his design. “You shouldn't have sent your men after me. I noticed you have a new pet following your every command.” He spared Cordell the smallest of glances. “I take it Matteo didn't make it.”

“No, he didn't. Nor did Carlo. But you already know that. There was barely anything left. His last act of loyalty was letting the pigs get their fill of him first before they started on me.”

“When you train your pigs to eat human flesh, you can't be surprised that they'll go for your throat just as quickly as everyone else, Mason. Well, face, I should say.” Will straightened, meeting Mason's gaze. “And the others? They forfeited their lives the second they took your money. The moment they touched Margot.”

“Those nurses and doctor were just doing their job, Will.”

“Yes, just a routine, forced, hysterectomy on an abducted woman.” Will scoffed, “They had what was coming to them.”

“Apparently, I should have acted sooner. It wasn't bad enough that Margot upset Papa with her insistence for shopping at the market across town, but then she changed her mind and picked *you* for her stud horse.” Mason pointed his fork at Hannibal. “Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, doctor, but Will here is gay for the pay. You should check to make sure he didn't clean you out while he was hiding in your house. Lord knows he cozied up to Margot hoping for a chance to get part of the Verger fortune.”

When Hannibal looked to Will, nothing in his features to let on if he was angry or curious, Will found himself wanting him to know. Audience be damned. “Margot never had a moment's peace with her brother in charge of their family business. When her parents were alive, and then with Mason, they tormented her constantly for not being a good, Christian daughter. 'Not the marrying type.' Never as good as their perfect son.” He smiled as he thought of the woman he met in a different life. Scared and lonely but learned to be brave after they became friends. After she found she was no longer alone. “She wanted a baby. I helped her. And if I could help her get away from her brother's control too, all the better.”

“That was never for you to decide.” Mason's annoyance began to bleed through his cockiness. “Because of your interference, you set back all of my plans I had for dear Margot. And our baby. A *real* Verger baby. I can't allow any heir of ours to come from such poor seed. Though, I'm sure I can find some use for your bundle of joy.”

Will looked once more to Mason and had to reign in his urge for blood. Not yet. Not just yet. He did, however, smile and leaned as close as his bonds allowed. “You don't even know where her body is, remember? And you'll never know. You'll never get near her again, or her baby.”

“Never say 'never,' Will. I think you'll be changing your tune very soon. I can't wait for you to see what all I have planned for you.” Mason shared a laugh with Cordell, who waited to the side for any further command. “And if not you, maybe when I spend some time on your friend here, you'll grow more talkative.”

Hannibal tensed, dread filling his eyes as he looked from Mason to Will. Will gave nothing away as he looked over Hannibal's form. He seemed so scared, in so much physical and emotional pain. Truth and play blending flawlessly for those observing their drama. In that moment, Will didn't think he had ever loved anyone or thing as much as he loved Hannibal. He shrugged a shoulder, sighing as he turned his attention once more to Mason.

“It's a shame. He was the perfect cover.” Will leveled an unimpressed look at Mason. The stifled sob from the end of the table sent a shiver up his spine and a smile curling his mouth. “Technically, Mason, I'm probably more considered 'gay for the stay.'”

“Unfortunately, your stay has been cut short. Too bad for Dr. Lecter, to end everything knowing it was all just an act. However, what can you expect when you partake in such an impure union? The Devil is always looking to deceive.” Mason laughed and tapped his

fingers along the table. “And since it looks like I'm the only one who's appreciating the feast Cordell slaved over, let's move on to the main event. Cordell, if you would.”

Mason stood and signaled for more of his men to collect Will. They pulled him up and bound his wrists once more. He spared Hannibal one last glance before he was pushed back towards the front door. Cordell was with Hannibal, guiding his unresistant form further into the house. Will couldn't think about Hannibal now. He trusted him. Hannibal was used to surviving, long before he met Will. He'd get out of whatever Mason had planned.

He needed to focus on himself. If he didn't stay alert, keep track of any opportunity he had, he would die. Margot would face something worse than death. The baby—it didn't bear thinking what Mason would do if he ever got his hands on Margot's baby.

They marched him across the frozen pasture to the barn. The hired men didn't look at him, gave Mason a wide berth. There was a tension to the air. A silence. Everything perched on the pause before a scream. Will could feel it hanging over them all. Whatever was to happen it would be soon and it would leave behind a haze of carnage. The world painted in malice. An imprint of evil its mark would echo for years.

He was taken to the back of the barn. The large doors creaked closed behind them. Everything was washed in the golden glow of several lanterns placed around the interior. The furthest corner pen was prepared just for him. His wrists were cut free of the plastic ties only to be gathered above his head. Cold, rusted metal clasped around his wrists, locked tight. Without pause one man stepped forward and started slicing away Will's clothes as Mason stood back to watch. If it wasn't for a nearby furnace, his teeth would have immediately begun to chatter.

Mason paced around him, taking in the inches of his body that were slowly revealed. He poked and prodded, squeezed his muscles in a considering way. “Did Margot tell you how she and I spent our childhood?”

“She told me enough.”

“I'm sure she did. Filling in spots with lies to make her the abused daughter—not even considered second favorite out of a pair of twins. Poor, mistreated Margot.” His hand drifted to Will's biceps before pressing along his shoulder and then his back. “I don't suppose you'll suddenly realize you've been beaten and just tell me where Margot is.”

Will shrugged, breathing slow to ease his heart rate. “I don't know where Margot's at. I thought she was dead. That's what you've told everyone.”

“To keep you on the run. Are you sure you don't want to save yourself some pain? I know you know, or at least know a way to find her.”

Will smiled and met Mason's excited stare. “You're gonna drag this out, no matter what I tell you. It's your nature, Mason. Just can't help yourself.”

Mason came closer, running a hand along his spine. “That's true. There's no need to hurry this all along. By the end, you'll be happy to give me whatever I want. That's the thing about

animals, Will. Even the most stubborn can be broken in." He clicked his tongue in disapproval as he traced searching fingers along all the scars on Will's body, stopping before him to feel the jagged line across his abdomen. "During my education as a boy, Papa took me with him to all the big fairs. I've seen animals from all over the world. The most exotic and beautiful. The very best that generations of breeding can create." He sneered as he looked over Will's frame that shook from the cold. "You're not even close to being considered *proper stock*. Marked. Used. Damaged. Poor pedigree. Be that as it may, you will have the full Verger Dynasty experience."

Mason signaled to the other man in the stall with them. At the sound of metal scraping against metal, Will turned to look over his shoulder. The man was stoking the embers of the furnace, building the hot coals to roaring flames. He picked up a rod. Fixed to the end was a flat, round plate. A symbol Will was familiar with. The Verger family crest. A brand all their livestock wore. Mason settled against the rail of the pen. His rapturous gaze never left Will as the flickering iron was set to the skin of his back.

Chapter End Notes

inhuman screeching This chapter was so difficult to write! It took me forever to get an okay handle on Mason's character. Sorry if this was terrible. I've spent longer on this chapter than any other part of the story. Rewriting, editing, cutting, pasting--this version is the best I could do. I hope it all makes sense. However, it was tons of fun writing Will and Hannibal's interactions. Maybe it's because I have a gallows sense of humor, but the idea of the two playing with everyone, being dramatic for their audience's benefit, gave me so much life. It helped when I was otherwise stuck with the other parts of this arc. I hope you all enjoyed this! See you next week!

~CReed

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Notes

> Thank you so much to Pia_Pia, Jor_ishere, ellethom, Axelle, EmilyElm, Psycho_Serendipity and El Escritor Celoso for taking the time to leave me such kind comments. I appreciate hearing from you and what you thought of the last chapter. It means a lot to me that you continue to let me you know you're out there and enjoy what I post. :) Hope everyone stopping by likes this installment--the conclusion to the meeting at Mason's farmhouse. Stay safe, sane and happy, dear readers!

Chapter Thirteen

There was a trick Will had. Ever since he was a child. Whenever the emotions of everyone around him became too much. If his stress levels climbed too high. Any time the ugliness of the world got to him. He used his boundless reserves of imagination to get away. Disappear deep inside himself. His mind was infinite and ever-changing to adapt to his surroundings and experiences. No walls to restrict him. An endless forest, always green and rich. Often, he pictured himself fishing in tranquil waters.

A patchwork quilt of memories. Every moment he thought beautiful. The times he was happiest. When he felt safe. From the rivers and lakes his father took him to, to the times he set out on his own adventures when he grew up. Nothing but him and the fish. And the comforting quiet of the stream. He never knew why he did it, never tried to understand his motivations. A lot of people would say he dissociated when he did this. A defense mechanism. They were close to being right.

It was useful when Will couldn't physically remove himself from that which he wanted to escape.

There came a soft pressure in his head, as if breaking the surface of water he had been submerged in. Next, he noticed the scraping ache at his wrists. The shackles around them not tight enough to keep from slipping high on his thumb joint when his legs slumped beneath him. A tingling tightness radiated out from the middle of his back, between his shoulders. The smell of burnt flesh tickled his nose. Mason's voice filtered through the haze in his mind and Will stood straighter, once more taking his weight off his arms.

He hadn't lost time, merely stepped away for a moment.

“...of stronger stuff than I thought. I guess your breed has that going for it—no pampering to soften you up. Or fat on you!” Will grunted as he was poked hard in the side. “A high pain tolerance as well. I wonder if your offspring will exhibit these same traits.”

“I guess we'll never know,” Will said through gritted teeth. He kept his eyes on Mason's when he took him by the chin.

Mason's crooked mouth veered to the side, equivalent of a smile, as he looked over Will's relaxed posture. “You don't really care about your spawn's safety since it's out of my reach, for now. I wonder how nonchalant you'll be once I start on your doctor.”

Will shrugged, wincing as the movement stretched his back. “He's not that good of leverage, Mason. You'd be better off knocking him out and dropping him on his lawn.”

“So you do care what happens to him. I suppose, even as a cover, you were bound to grow attached.”

“Just sayin', he's a Lecter. You've already killed his twin. His family is more esteemed than yours. What do you think they'd do if you hurt him?”

“His disappearance will be connected to yours. Another victim to add to your collection.”

“You won't leave his family anything to bury?” Will couldn't help his curiosity.

Mason couldn’t help his need to brag. “There won't be anything left. Not once I'm done. After you let my pigs tear my face off, and Cordell explained all the options I have for my damaged tissue, I became even more interested in the human body. We are a resilient species. Most injuries we suffer can be healed with enough time and proper resources. Cordell offered to grow me an entirely new face from my own cells.”

“The advancements of modern science are truly a marvel.”

“But why would I do that when I've already had that face? We've spent the past three months experimenting with grafts of different skin samples. For a long time, I imagined using yours.”

“You want my face?” He really shouldn't have been surprised. Mason was always coming up with some batshit crazy idea.

“Imagine Margot's reaction to me finding her with your face grafted onto mine!” Mason laughed until he wiped tears from his eyes. “But no, I don't want your face. I've changed my mind. The moment I saw pictures of Dr. Lecter, I knew I found my final donor. And let me just say, seeing him in person has only cemented my decision. I'm no degenerate like you, Will, but I can see why you targeted him. He has such lovely skin. I'll use every part of him, don't you worry.” Mason considered Will for a moment. “Not going to beg for his safety?”

“As much as I know you love hearing it, no, I'm not.” Will couldn't help giggling. Let his humor be blamed on pain and fear alone. “Hannibal doesn't need me to beg on his behalf.”

“I'll be sure to let him know your sentiments, before he goes under Cordell's scalpel. And now I must go check on my other guest.” He gave Will a few stinging slaps to his cheek. “I'll be back later for more good, funny times, Will. Maybe you'll even live to see all of Cordell's work.”

He listened to Mason's footsteps retreat. He spewed off some orders for his men to follow. Scuffling and shuffling around as everyone attempted to look busy under their employer's watchful eye. The barn door slammed shut. No locks clicking in place. Bored chatter from his guards. No one in sight of his pen.

Will didn't waste further time. He could feel the cold sapping his energy, his strength. There was a good probability that Mason would forget about him for a while. In that time, if the guards didn't bother with him, he could die from exposure. He needed to be free long before his body gave in to the elements.

Will studied the shackles. Old, iron. Rusted. Standard cuffs with chains attached to each. The beam they were wrapped around above him was sturdy. No sagging or decay. With enough tries he could break the beam, but the noise would draw attention. The quickest option he had wasn't ideal, but it would get the job done. He took a few steadying breaths and relaxed as much as he could. With a firm grip on each one, he dislocated his thumbs.

His hands slipped free and Will swallowed his cries of pain as he set his joints back in place. After having a hot brand against his naked skin, it wasn't the worst pain he had ever felt. He flexed his hands as much as he could, warming by the furnace as he took a moment to regain his composure. On his way to the pen, he counted six men. Most of them stayed near the front. He could feel his frustration wanting to consume him, turn into panic. They would have to be dealt with quietly, preferably one-on-one, and Will did not have time for that.

As much as he tried to appear aloof about Hannibal, he was anything but. As much as he knew Hannibal could handle himself, that it was Hannibal's idea to be taken, Will couldn't stop the dread building in his gut. If this was how Mason was treating him, who knew what happened to Hannibal once they left each other's sight. He pushed those thoughts away, locked his feelings down, and took in his immediate surroundings. Searching for any kind of weapon or protection.

Advancing footsteps came to outside the pen. Maybe it was time for another special treatment fit for Mason's pigs. Perhaps they were ordered to check on him now and then, make sure he hadn't frozen to death. It would forever remain a mystery. The guard didn't have time to voice his alarm at finding the shackles empty. Will waited for him to come as close as he needed and then buried an ax blade into his face.

For a moment, Will was afraid the ax would break. An antique like everything else in the barn. The haft was heavy wood, worn over decades of faithful use. It fit his grip perfectly. Whomever it had belonged to, they took excellent care of it. The blade was slightly dull but wasn't rusted. Still connected tightly to the eye. Will ignored the warm blood that sprayed across his face and neck, the squelching sound as he yanked the ax free.

He stepped over the twitching body and out of the pen. One at a time he extinguished the lamps. By the time Mason's men noticed the growing darkness, or that those who wandered to the back of the barn weren't returning, it was too late for them. None of them had guns. It made everything easier, quiet. No sounds to give away the struggle. He didn't want anyone at the house to know what he was up to just yet.

The last man was the only one who put up any kind of a fight. He threw anything within reach at Will, catching him in the ribs and thigh. He no longer felt pain or the cold. The man bellowed as he was caught in the shin with one of Will's strong swings. Through his haze of butchery Will noticed it was the man who branded him. He started to limp away, a trail of blood soaking into the thirsty old dirt beneath their feet. His hands were raised, shaking. Begging for mercy. Will wondered if the man would have paused, even for a second, had Will done the same to him. He hefted the ax above his head and brought it down with all his strength.

Screams filled the barn. Will kept swinging. Until the pleading stopped. The gurgling gasps faded. His ax no longer met resistance. All that remained was a messy heap of what used to be something human. Will no longer shivered from the cold. Warmed by the blood that covered him from hair to toes and the adrenaline that rushed hot through his veins. The barn door rattled open behind him and Will gripped his ax with slippery fingers. Ready. Waiting. Eager for someone else to cut through on his way to Hannibal. He looked over his shoulder at the silhouette in the doorway and his tremors intensified. The ax fell from his hands, landing with a wet thud on the poor bastard he reduced to a pile of meat and bone.

Will turned as Hannibal came to him, tossing something on the hay as he stalked across the carnage. A bloody hammer. Without conscious thought Will stepped closer. He reached out, checking if Hannibal was injured. None of the blood on him seemed to be his. His fingers left bloody smears against Hannibal's cheek and jaw. So pale beneath streaks of red. Hannibal's usual calm had cracked. His breath ruffled Will's damp hair as he panted. Usually such an astonishing mix of hazel and auburn, Hannibal's eyes were almost black. They glinted with adrenaline and a pleasure Will was familiar with.

The thrill of the hunt. A bone-deep satisfaction from carving a path through those that tried to separate them.

As he took in Hannibal, so too was he studied. Every hitch of his breath, every wound he suffered, was marked and memorized. Hannibal stepped around him without touching. The sound of rustling fabric came from behind him and then Hannibal's coat was carefully placed about his shoulders. Though the wool was soft and deliciously warm from Hannibal's body, it still sent shocks of pain through him when it rubbed against his burn. He hissed at the contact and Hannibal leaned to nuzzle against his bloody temple, soft apologies whispered between kisses.

He led Will back to the house. The cold didn't faze him still, even as he trudged mostly naked and barefoot through the snow. It was silent when they walked in. The lights were off. Only the dying fire kept the darkness from swallowing them. He followed Hannibal to a door near the back of the house, down a narrow hallway. It opened to a rickety staircase that disappeared into what was most likely a root cellar at one time.

The newly installed light bulbs were strung from a few spots on the ceiling. This was the room Mason spent the most time renovating. A few pieces of specific medical equipment were placed around the room, new and ready for use. Utensils waited, gleaming and untouched. The operating table was prepped, along with an IV drip with a fresh bag of saline solution.

Mason was going to keep Hannibal alive for as long as possible in this cellar.

Some of Will's fury was alleviated when his gaze landed on Cordell lying face-down on the floor. No doubt, Mason told everyone what to expect when he captured Will. He was violent, dangerous. Opportunistic. If he saw a weakness he would exploit it. It was imperative to restrain him at all times and to never let their guard down around him.

Mason had no idea the same could be said about Dr. Hannibal Lecter.

Harmless, heartbroken Hannibal. The easily seduced dupe, whom Will purposely kept their attention off.

Will could see everything happen as if he was the one who was taken down into the dank depths for untold torture and debasement. They all thought that they had won. So much smarter and stronger than their prey. They had used their money and connections to hide behind often enough that one more murder would never touch them. Will was already taken care of. Subdued and muzzled. They could relax.

All Hannibal needed was one moment of freedom. Cordell turned his back, explaining the process of just what would be happening to Hannibal in only a few more minutes. Mason would want to be involved, want another chance to terrify and taunt, that he wouldn't administer the anesthesia just yet. Will looked closer, noting the chunk torn out of Cordell's face. A ferocious bite. Not only did it stun him but also flooded him with the dreadful realization that they had completely miscalculated the threat to them. A pool of blood spread out from beneath his head. If Will had to guess, there would be a scalpel lodged in Cordell's neck. Effective and quiet and more than Mason's right hand deserved.

Will looked away from the body. Hannibal was watching him piece together the scene, transfixed. He took Will by the elbow and led him across the room. “I have something for you.”

He pulled a curtain aside to reveal another operating table. Sprawled across was Mason Verger. His eyes were frozen in a look of shocked terror. His head set at an awkward angle, arms dangling limp off the sides of the metal slab. Will's pulse kicked up a beat or two when a choked clicking sound came from Mason. His vibrant eyes rolled before settling on Will.

“You didn't kill him.”

Hannibal stood close behind Will but didn't touch him. “He was your quarry before he was mine. I wish to share in your kill, if you will permit me.”

Will turned and leaned his body against Hannibal. He was sore and tired and wanted to return to Katinka. But the idea of participating in something like this with Hannibal...It felt sacred. A part of himself he thought no one would ever understand, let alone delight in. With him. Will rested his cheek against his sturdy shoulder and shivered as Hannibal brushed a stiff curl off his forehead. “Yes.”

Hannibal breathed a sigh of relief against the crown of his head, as if doubting for a moment that Will would consent. There was a tremble to him Will could feel through the warm layers

between them. He buried his nose in Will's hair, grounding himself with his scent. “What do you see when you look at him, Will?”

Will glanced back at Mason's twitching form before returning to the comfort of Hannibal. “He's a *pig*. Less than even the animals he ruthlessly slaughters. A disgusting beast, ruled by revolting urges, who's not even fit to eat. He's hurt so many innocent people. Destroyed so many lives.”

Hannibal took him gently by the jaw and tilted his face up to his. “What's to be done about that?”

“*Show* me what you see when you look at him, Hannibal. For Nigel.”

Tears glistened along Hannibal's lashes but they didn't fall. Deep, aching emotion filled the look he swept over Will's bloody form. Something genuine. So far from the display he made at the dinner table earlier. He leaned to kiss him. Soft as moth wings. The salt of blood tingling on Will's tongue. “I never thought I could love someone as I do you, Will.” One more kiss before he stepped away and focused entirely on Mason. “Forgive me for leaving you so long unattended, Mr. Verger. Now, let us see what we have to work with, hmm?”

* * * * *

The day was a blur that Will would remember with a yellow kind of haze. A faded, tattered photograph. Rough edges and influenced by the man he shared it with. It seemed to take longer to return to the place they were taken. Hannibal had helped Will to his Bentley, hidden down the highway from the motel in overgrown brush and trees. While Will dozed in the front seat, not sleeping but not quite present, Hannibal abandoned the car they took from Mason's farmhouse at the motel and grabbed the bag Will was forced to leave behind. No trace that they were ever there.

A warm hand to his cheek brought Will's attention back to the moment. Hannibal hadn't said a word, just watching as Will returned from his wandering thoughts. He looked around and found they were parked in their garage.

“Bell?”

“Mischa went out for the day, taking Katinka with her. They should be gone for a few more hours yet.” Hannibal exited the car to come around and help Will out. Will groaned as his back protested the movement, the scrape of his shirt against sensitive skin. Mira met them with enthusiastic adoration. It had been a few hours since Mischa checked on her. She whined and yipped but settled as Hannibal knelt to keep her from tripping Will in her excitement. “I'll meet you upstairs, Will, after I see to Mira.”

Hannibal let her lick and nuzzle as he murmured gentle praise to the lonely pup. Will could have watched the exchange for hours but the call of their home, and all the comforts within, was too tempting. He dragged himself upstairs and started peeling his clothes off as soon as he reached their bathroom.

Blood came off him in reddish-brown flakes with every movement. He kept from touching his surroundings as much as possible. Everything he wore to the farmhouse was now in a neatly folded pile on the floor. It would all have to burn. Will was sad to see those boots go but everything could be replaced. It wasn't the first time he had to destroy evidence. He turned on the shower, testing the water to make sure it didn't scald him, before stepping in.

When it came to pain, Will tried to get the worst of it over with as soon as possible. It was sometimes a reckless way to be but never failed him. He clenched his teeth and leaned against the cold tiles as the spray of water hit his back.

He was watching the red water circle down the drain when the frosted glass doors of the shower slid open. Hannibal stepped in behind him. All Will had the energy to do was stare. There wasn't as much blood on him. A little in his hair and a smear here and there on his face. He had worn gloves and a smock when he worked on Mason. Hannibal was brisk and efficient as he washed his body and hair, leaning into the shower mist until the slick foam washed away. As soon as he finished with himself, he focused entirely on Will.

Hannibal coaxed him away from the wall to face him. He picked up Will's hands one at a time to examine their damage. They were slightly swollen around his thumbs with faint bruising. “I don't think there are any tears or fractures, but I recommend x-rays. Just to be safe.” He smiled at him, stepping closer to take Will's jaw in his hands. He carefully tilted his head back so the water soaked through Will's matted hair. Rivulets of red ran down his forehead and neck. Hannibal seemed captivated by the sight and Will shivered at the look, at the memory of seeing something similar when he helped Hannibal tear Mason Verger apart. Hannibal traced his cheekbone with careful touches before he kissed his forehead. “Imaginative lone wolf,” he praised.

Will found himself smiling, finally beginning to thaw as steam gathered around them. He let Hannibal position him how he wanted as he set to working shampoo through his tangles. Once cleaned and conditioned to his satisfaction, Hannibal took up cloth and soap to gently scrub the dried blood and grit from him. Will braced himself once more as Hannibal turned him to examine and clean his burned skin. He didn't keep his pain in. No one else was around to hear his cries and curses.

Later, body damp and hair dripping onto pristine sheets, Will lay sprawled across Hannibal's lap as he reclined against the headboard in their bedroom. For the past few minutes, he tried to relax as Hannibal wrapped his hands in bandages before moving on to dabbing cream on his back. To take his mind off his discomfort, Will started to speak. And once he began, he found he couldn't—didn't want to—stop.

“I met Margot Verger a little over a year ago. Back when I worked for the FBI. The only reason the Vergers and I ever crossed paths was because the branch of the bureau I worked for suspected Mason of white-collar crimes—tax evasion, fraud, money laundering and possibly trafficking. It didn't take a genius to see Mason was capable of so much more. I kept my thoughts to myself, did my job, helped build a case against him. During that time, I befriended his sister. She's his complete opposite. She came to me with her fears. And her desires. If she could have a baby, an heir to her family's fortune and legacy, she could escape Mason. So, I helped her. I've never really thought about my sexuality. I rarely connect with

people, so any time I do have sex—it doesn't matter their gender. But Margot's not like that. She has her preferences and I don't fit them. I hope one day she can find a woman who loves her, start a family with her. That's all she ever wanted: to raise a baby far from Mason's influence.

“But I knew a baby wouldn't end things. I *knew* Mason wouldn't be able to let her go, not leave her baby untouched. He was controlling and sadistic. That combined with his ridiculous conservative and religious upbringing made him one of the worst kinds of monsters. It was almost a compulsion, his need to dominate and hurt Margot. I kept an eye on them. And, finally, I got her to make plans to leave. It was set up like witness protection. We both would part ways, go somewhere neither of us knew about and stay in sporadic contact. Until she was ready to have the baby. Then we would meet back up and settle things with Mason.

“The night we were to leave to our separate locations, Mason sent some of his men after me. After I dealt with them, I tried to get a hold of Margot. If he finally made a move against me, there was no telling what he did to her. I was on the phone with her when Mason's enforcer attacked her—ran her off the road on her way to meet me. Mason got away with so many terrible things because he committed his crimes at his family's mansion. I knew this wouldn't be any different, so I went there.

“When I found Margot, she was unconscious on an operating table. A doctor and nurses all around her. Mason was gonna take her uterus. Make sure she had no one left but him. I killed them all. They didn't deserve any kind of mercy, and if I left it to the authorities, they would have walked free after a slap on the wrist. Before I took Margot away, I paid Mason a visit. I couldn't kill him. Their father's will would have left Margot destitute if Mason died without there being a future heir. So, I punished him. In a way that befitted a man as disgusting as he is. And then we ran. Until Margot and the baby were safe. Until I could deal with Mason for good.”

Will sat up, Hannibal's hands slipping from him, and watched Hannibal for any kind of reaction. He settled closer and Hannibal kept him steady with a firm grip on his hips. “Margot sounds very brave.”

“She is. And strong.”

“She would have to be, living in a house full of sadists. I am glad you were able to be a friend to her.” Hannibal ran his hand along his side in a comforting caress. However, Will forgot himself and pain shot down his back when he arched into the touch. Hannibal hummed sympathetically and pulled Will to lay once more across his lap to examine the brand. He pressed around the burn, noting when Will winced or flinched. “I can alter this, if you wish. I could make it illegible so the name can't be seen. Or I could remove it entirely.”

Will groaned and sat up, shaking off his probing fingers. “No more procedures. Give me a week or two, at least.”

“Very well.”

Will found himself smiling and pressed closer, playing with the waistline of Hannibal's pajama pants. “It's all over. No more running. No more hiding.” He breathed a small laugh as

he leaned his forehead against Hannibal's shoulder. “I hardly know what to do with myself.”

“Whatever you choose, I hope you include us in your plans.”

“Well, we are engaged.” The memory sent warm excitement pulsing through him and he smiled again. He took Hannibal by his jaw and turned his face towards him. “I do love you, Hannibal. I don't think I ever got to say it out loud.”

“But you showed me. With your body and deeds. With blood and your brilliance. With the hunt you shared with me.”

“No one else but you. You're the only one I've ever wanted to reveal that part of myself to.”

“And I cherish it. I'll nurture it and help it flourish. As you have, and will, help me strive to be my best. I promise.”

Will kissed him and felt like his heart might burst. This was all he would ever want. Safe and tucked away from the world, with Hannibal. They drifted into a peaceful sleep. Soon Mischa would return with Katinka. Will's family. Happy and healthy and his.

* * * * *

For the next few weeks, Will enjoyed late autumn in Lithuania. They kept close to home, the city's attractions seemingly at their doorstep. He grudgingly admitted to Mischa that perhaps living among civilization wasn't so terrible a thing when she took him out to browse galleries and taste all the new seasonal creations at her favorite cafes.

She had been terribly worried for him when she returned with Katinka and found him haggard and bandaged. Haunted by the sight of him looking so similar to when they first met. Will assured her with soft words and tight hugs that he was fine. Everything was fine. However, he hadn't been watching as he should and slipped on a patch of ice, spraining his hands when he caught himself on the frozen pavement. With Hannibal there, flawless in corroboration and engineered compassion, Mischa accepted the story.

Any other lingering concern evaporated when they shared the news of their engagement. After Mischa begged, Hannibal called Robertus and Murasaki. They didn't mind their retreat to Thailand being interrupted by their nephew explaining himself to them. Will didn't think they seemed surprised and wondered just what all the couple had picked up on in the last few months. Though, they did fondly chastise Hannibal for waiting to propose when they all were scattered across the globe.

Mischa spent the following weeks planning with Hannibal. Their announcement called for another dinner party. Grand. Elaborate. Will had to speak up when he heard mutterings of the pros and cons of a masquerade theme. Since then he was dragged into it all, Mischa gleefully asking his opinion on everything. He couldn't say he minded all too terribly.

Mischa was on her way over to join them for breakfast when the phone rang. Mason's cell phone. It rang often in the weeks following their reunion. With some persuasion on Hannibal's part, Mason was kind enough to give them his passwords and codes. Usually it

was Will who answered. That morning was no different. Hannibal watched while he fed Katinka, smiling as Will slid effortlessly into a Mid-Atlantic accent. Not as pompous as Mason's but very close.

“Mason Verger's phone, Mr. Verger's assistant speaking. Yes, Mr. Verger had a bounty in place. It is no longer active. No, I am not at liberty to disclose such information. Confidentiality, you understand. However, I can confirm a team fulfilled Mr. Verger's contract three weeks ago to his satisfaction. Yes, I am aware that the website has yet to be updated.” Will smiled at Hannibal, his amusement growing as Hannibal winked at him before returning his attention to Katinka. “The site will have a final update very soon. Thank you for your interest. Have a lovely day.”

The doorbell rang and Will stood from the little table in their breakfast nook, pocketing the phone. On his way by, he kissed Katinka's head. It wasn't the same as Castle Lecter, but Will was growing rather fond of the new place. Their home. Any other time he would have balked at the location, the décor. Too big. Too *fancy*. But now all Will could see was Hannibal's influence, feel his presence in everything. Evolved to include comforts for Will and Katinka. With family within walking distance.

He unlocked the front door and made room for Mischa to step inside. Taking her coat, he accepted the kiss to his cheek.

“Sorry, I forgot to unlock it this morning.”

“You weren't my first stop, anyway.” Mischa lifted a box of fresh pastries that Will took from her as they came back to the warm kitchen. Hannibal returned from putting Katinka in her downstairs playpen just as they sat at the table with a cup of coffee. “Good morning. It smells divine in here, Hannibal.”

Hannibal took the praise with a smile as he grabbed a kitchen towel. Will watched as he pulled a dish from the oven. “He's been practicing new recipes lately.”

Mischa made a pleased sound of interest as she watched them over her cup. Her eyes seemed to shine with amusement as she took in Hannibal's relaxed frame, removing the apron from over his pajamas. When Hannibal placed a plate before them all she asked him, “Has your muse struck you with inspiration?”

Will couldn't help smiling at his plate, focused entirely on breaking into the golden crust of his quiche. He turned to Hannibal that morning, in the soft quiet before they left their bed, and told him of the cravings he woke with. A hankering for something he hadn't enjoyed since living in the south. Of course, it wasn't the same parts, and not ever as elaborate as what Hannibal made, but it was close enough. Will brought a steaming forkful to his mouth and he couldn't help closing his eyes at the taste, the texture. A little bit of heat to the eggs. Mushrooms sautéed in butter. The creaminess of the kidney and the crisp richness of the sweetbreads was almost enough to make him swoon. Everything he had woken up wanting. He opened his eyes and found Hannibal sipping his coffee, yet to taste the fruits of his effort.

Hannibal glanced to Will before setting his cup aside to pick up his fork and knife. “Endlessly.”

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Notes

> Here we are, beginning the wind-down. I'm so glad everyone reading enjoyed the last two chapters. I hope it was a conclusion that was satisfying to you. Thanks so much to Pia_Pia, Jor_ishere, EmilyElm, Axelle, ellethom, DaringD, Sabi, ns100 and two_for_joy for taking the time to leave such lovely comments. I always love to hear what you all think so far and appreciate the kind words. This is an interesting chapter and I hope you all enjoy it. We still find ourselves in strange times. Please stay safe, dear readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Fourteen

Will stepped out of the airport and smiled, tilting his head back to feel the warmth of the bright sun on his face. The sky was a clear, cloudless blue. So much hotter than he was used to. It was strange knowing that the winter holidays would be starting soon with such mild weather. Strange knowing he could be wearing his heavy boots to trudge through snow, layered in jeans and thermals and flannels right then, instead of the khaki slacks and white polo shirt he had on. Will could see why Margot picked Argentina as one of her places to hide. Completely different from the environment she grew up in.

As soon as Will could he contacted Margot, leaving an email address behind. By the end of that same day, she called him. It was good to hear her voice again and not have it marred by fear and sadness. They made plans for meeting. She was nearly nine months pregnant and Will didn't want her to attempt finding him. He came to her. *They* came to her.

Hannibal took up the spot next to him, patting Katinka's back to soothe the fussy baby. She was tired from the flight. He looked at the small collection of bags at Will's feet. A carry-on for each of them. Most of their things were sent ahead. Will looked them over and couldn't help smiling. A lovely pair they made. Even after the long hours in the air, with stops in between to sight-see, Hannibal was unblemished as ever. His goldenrod suit had barely a wrinkle. Hair still perfect. Ever-curious eyes hidden behind sunglasses. He whispered now and again to Katinka who grew limp in his hold, dozing against his shoulder. A tiny, grumpy doll in a white sundress dotted with bright red cherries. Will took pity on her hours ago and slipped her white sandals off.

“Do we have everything, Will?”

“Yes. Now we just wait for our ride.”

“A car was sent?”

“I guess? She said for us to not worry about anything once we landed. I texted her when I grabbed our bags.” It wasn't a very big airport. Privately owned. They would be hard to miss if someone was looking for a group with their description. Just as he thought it, a car pulled up near them. He couldn't contain his pleased surprise as a very familiar figure stepped out of the driver's seat. “Alana!”

She barely got to the sidewalk before they hugged each other, laughing in their excitement. Her grip tightened for a moment as she looked him over. “I am so glad to see you!”

South America suited her. Her long brown hair was lighter than he remembered, streaked with caramel strands from the sun. She had a tan, shown off by the delicate black and red dress that wrapped around her figure. He forgot how small, but formidable, she was. Will kept hold of her hand as he brought her closer to his family.

“Hannibal, this is Dr. Alana Bloom. She's a friend, and sometimes colleague, of mine when I worked for a stint at Quantico. Also, she was Mason's psychiatrist at one time. Alana, this is Dr. Hannibal Lecter, my fiancé. And this is our daughter, Katinka.” It still sent an electric thrill up his spine whenever he said that aloud, and Hannibal always gave his pleasure away with a little smirk whenever he heard it.

Alana smiled even brighter and kissed Will on the cheek before she shook Hannibal's hand. “It's wonderful to meet you.”

“Likewise, Dr. Bloom.”

“Please, just 'Alana.' Let me help get your bags in the trunk.”

Hannibal followed behind them as Katinka yawned and turned her face into his neck. “I hope you and Margot don't mind us tagging along with Will. I heard so much about Margot, I insisted on meeting her. With everything she has been through, I couldn't help feeling concerned for her and the baby.”

“Not at all. After Will told us what's been going on for the last few months, *we* would have insisted on meeting you, had you not already made plans to come. Margot's so excited to see you all. There's a car seat in the back, if you want to get Katinka settled.”

Hannibal thanked her and started the process of coaxing a temperamental baby out of her comfy spot and into a seat she didn't want. Soon, Alana and Will joined them in the coolness of the car. Alana started her Hybrid and inched it into traffic. Will enjoyed the silence while he could. Margot and Alana would have plenty of questions for him, some he didn't want to think about. He could admit to his own curiosity as well. It had been so long since he'd seen either woman. There was a lot of catching up to do.

Lots of planning for a future he hadn't been entirely convinced that he had up until a few weeks ago.

He hadn't expected to feel such anticipation. A giddy kind of nervousness. Will couldn't wait to introduce Katinka and Hannibal to Margot. To have his family meet hers. By the end of their trip, welcome a new member to both. All his thoughts were interrupted, surprisingly, by

Alana. Surprising not because she felt the need to fill the comfortable silence, but the topic she chose.

“I'm shocked you haven't started your lecture yet.” When he only looked at a loss, she smiled as she turned onto a highway. “A reprimand that starts with, 'I told you so?'”

Will smiled and shook his head, glancing to Hannibal in the rear-view mirror. “I warned Alana to not get involved with Mason. Before all this started. He suddenly started shopping around for the best psychiatrist money could buy. Of course, Dr. Bloom's name came up.”

Alana sighed as she maneuvered around traffic. “Hind-sight is twenty-twenty, and all that. Now it's all so obvious that he wanted me there as an alibi, to paint Margot as the unstable and violent twin who was planning his death.”

Will smiled as he watched the city rush by. “He didn't count on you becoming close with Margot.”

“I almost lost her. She tried to tell me, get me to see. *You* tried to tell me what he was capable of. After the accident and you both were gone, he grew completely unhinged. Protected by money. He bought every cop and agent I met. I've worked with disturbed minds before, but Mason scared me. I quit, cut all ties.”

“I'm sorry you had to face all that alone.”

“I wasn't for very long. A month, or so, later Margot called me. Just once. She gave me one more chance, told me where I could meet her if I wanted to be with her.”

“What?”

Alana laughed and glanced his way. “She said you would be angry that she did that. But I didn't let her risk herself for nothing. Slowly, I went completely off-grid. Quit Georgetown and Quantico. Closed up my house, canceled all payments I could. Before Mason found me, I left the country. To Johannesburg.”

“South Africa? Was that where you stayed?”

Alana nodded, smiling at her memories. “For the better half of a year. It was indescribable, Will. Like a honeymoon. We were safe and in love and excited for the baby to get here. But then Margot 'sensed' she was being followed. She kept it from me for a day, thought it might be hormones making her paranoid. I told her she had the most experience with Mason and to trust her gut.”

“That's when she called me when I was living in Bucharest.”

“Yes. We hid in Iceland for a few weeks before coming to South America. I'm sorry for what happened, Will. If we had called sooner...And please don't be angry with Margot for calling me.”

“What happened isn't anyone's fault but the people who did it. And I'm not angry.” Will looked once more in the rear-view mirror. Hannibal was watching them, fascinated by their

story. “Having support of those you love makes a situation like this easier. I wouldn't have wanted her alone, or kept you two apart. I'm actually happy you were with her.”

Hannibal listened raptly, soaking up the information to fit with what he already knew. He only looked away from the front of the car when Katinka demanded his attention. There was no doubt that he wasn't still listening though. Will couldn't wait for Margot to meet them both. Alana didn't ask too many questions as they drove, waiting until they all could be together before Will told them everything that had happened since they parted ways. Almost everything.

He would keep it clean. Painless for Margot. She didn't need to know what all Mason did, or what Will and Hannibal did in response. His plans for just what he was going to tell Margot about her brother snuffed out of his brain as they started the ride up to a lone house on a lake. The sprawling house sat close to the shore, a path leading from the front door to the dock. A few boats of varying size and design were anchored, and Will couldn't help laughing as he shook his head. He wondered if Margot had ever swum in a lake or gone fishing in her entire life.

“I know,” Alana said and her smile echoed his. “But it's secluded and posh enough that Margot's stress levels haven't sky-rocketed too badly.”

“I didn't say anything.” Will gave her his best look of unassuming innocence.

“You didn't have to. I can feel your haughtiness. And put your puppy face away.”

Will laughed and when they pulled to a stop, he stepped out of the car to take a minute to breath in the cool air and enjoy the soft breeze blowing up from the water's rippling surface. Mountains could be seen over dark trees, perhaps just a few hours of a hike away. “It's gorgeous out here.”

“It is, but I think she's ready to go back. If you want to leave your bags in the car, we can leave everything ‘til after you get settled. I got your rooms ready. Katinka's should have everything she needs.”

Will nodded his thanks and waited for Hannibal to get Katinka before they all made their way to the house. Just as they entered the living room, footsteps echoed on the gleaming wooden floors from deeper within the house, and then there was Margot. She changed her hair, he thought. No longer the sharp, straight cut that flowed to her waist. Tight, bouncing curls that gleamed a warm copper in the dim lighting framed her more rounded face. It gave her a cherubic quality. Instead of striking suits—armor to hide behind much like Hannibal—she came to them in loose and gauzy materials that hid the exact shape of her belly.

She said his name, he saw a smile teasing her mouth, and then he had her in a careful hug. It was as if the last bit of his tension faded away at the sight of her. Proof, living and breathing and happy, that she was safe. Her baby was safe.

“I'm so glad you're okay.” Margot pressed her face into his shoulder, taking a moment to reign in her emotions. She pulled back to look him over, tracing a careful touch along the scar

on his forehead. “When you told me what happened...I feel terrible. I'm so sorry, Will. I'm so sorry you got dragged into all this, that you had to go through that on your own.”

“It wasn't your fault. None of this was your fault. And I wasn't by myself.” He smiled, squeezing her hand before turning to Hannibal. He took Katinka when Hannibal held her out to him. “I've been waiting for a long to time to introduce you face to face. Margot, this is Katinka and this is Hannibal. They're part of how I made it through these past few months.”

“She's so beautiful, Will.” Margot smiled and took up Katinka's hand before she stepped closer to Hannibal. “We talked over the phone, but seeing you in person is a little overwhelming. Thank you for taking care of Will. He's the closest friend I've ever had. And I'm so sorry for your family's loss. If there is anything I can do, for what my brother did, don't hesitate to tell me. It's not enough, won't ever be enough, but I wanted you and your family to know.”

Hannibal took up her hand, keeping her in his hold after a friendly shake. “That is very kind of you, but it wasn't your debt to pay, Margot. And I require no thanks for taking care of Will. His health and best interests have been, and shall always be, one of my top priorities.”

She smiled and kept hold of Hannibal as she guided them through the house, giving them a tour. Alana hovered but Margot insisted. Will bounced Katinka as they followed along, awed and confounded with every room they were shown. At least he knew Hannibal and Margot had a few more things in common than family tragedy. They could bond over their dramatic tastes and decadent style. The house had a hunting lodge undercurrent, hidden beneath layers of modern affluence. The room prepared for them overlooked the lake and Will had to stop to take in the view. Glittering water. A beach of sand and glossy stones. It almost didn't look real. He was devising ways to take Katinka down to the shore when Margot called after him.

Katinka's room was just through a door. Hannibal looked pleased as he surveyed the crib and furniture. All her things they sent ahead put away and ready. It wasn't home, but Katinka traveled well, so far, and could fall asleep anywhere. Just as they came back downstairs, and in the middle of being shown the small indoor pool, Katinka finally started to really fuss. Hannibal took her again, pressing kisses into her curls and politely excused himself. In part to see to Katinka but also to give Will more time with his old friends.

They wandered back to the living room after they finished showing him around and Will sank into the overstuffed sofa with a sigh, glass of iced tea in his hand. It had been a great trip, but flights were always exhausting. He watched as Margot returned from rifling through a desk in another room and couldn't help smiling. She was so big. Margot seemed tired but happy, hands drifting to her stomach every now and then to gently rub.

“I can't believe it's been almost nine months,” she said when she noticed where his eyes kept drifting.

“Me neither. You look beautiful, by the way.”

“If you say I'm glowing or pregnancy suits me, I'll punch you.”

“You weren't even showing when I last saw you and now...” He gestured to her everything.

“I know!” She laughed and eased down on the couch beside him. “I have something for you.”

Will put his drink on the waiting coaster at his knee and took the slip of paper. A picture. Black and white. Grainy. Far away, he was aware of Margot pressing closer to look with him. Alana laughing softly at his reaction. Warmth at his other side as Hannibal joined him after Katinka finally drifted off. Will was aware of all the activity around him but couldn't tear his eyes off the image. An ultrasound photo of the baby. The latest evidence of their progression. He tore his eyes away from the image to look at Margot who took his hand to lay across the curve of her stomach. She moved his hand around, searching, until Will felt movement. He couldn't help clutching at Hannibal with his free hand, grip possibly painful but Hannibal didn't pull away.

Alana came to sit beside Margot, resting her chin on her shoulder and slipped an arm around her back. “We're having a boy.”

Margot leaned back against Alana, a tired smile on her flushed face. “The Verger Heir.”

“That's all you ever wanted. I'm so happy for you. Both of you.” Will let himself feel for one last kick from the baby before he brought his hand to his lap.

There came a rumbling noise and both Margot and Alana laughed. “That's our cue to start making dinner,” Margot said and patted her belly. “It's probably earlier than you're both used to.”

“The last few weeks we've had to adjust eating times, it helps with Margot's digestion.” Alana kissed Margot's cheek before she stood.

“Sorry in advance. It's going to be really bland, whatever we make. I've had to be careful with anything too rich or spicy. Everything makes me sick. Alana says it's stress.”

“It is stress. You've been a ball of nerves this whole time. I'm surprised you haven't had heartburn and nausea from the beginning. Shows the strength of your nerves, I suppose.” Alana smiled at her, tracing her cheek with a gentle touch.

Margot took Alana's hand to kiss. “Well, most of my worry is gone now. Hopefully, this all should ease up.”

“If I might offer my assistance, I can make you something that should agree with your stomach troubles,” Hannibal piped up before Alana could leave Margot's side.

“We couldn't have you make us dinner, Dr. Lecter. You're our guest,” Alana said.

Hannibal stood, straightening his jacket. “It's no trouble at all. In fact, I insist. You and Margot have been isolated for months, fending for yourselves. I am happy to help you both relax. Let me take care of dinner while you enjoy the evening. And, Alana, I think it's only fair that you call me 'Hannibal' from now on.” He gave her a winsome smile and guided her back to sitting beside Margot with gentle guidance.

Alana was almost completely convinced, but her manners made her want to argue. Will shook his head. “You're not going to change his mind. And you won't be able to tear him away from your kitchen now. He's probably already planning the entire menu for our stay.”

Hannibal cut a glance to Will, a smile twitching at the corner of his mouth. “While you all catch up further, I'll start dinner. Nothing too rich, I promise.” With everyone sitting and comfortable, he turned and swept out of the room towards the kitchen.

When he was out of sight and hearing range Alana and Margot both turned to Will with incredulous smiles. Their twin looks of amusement made him want to fidget and he could feel a flush rising beneath his collar. “What?” His question came out a lot more defensive than he planned.

“Hannibal is very...” Alana trailed off, smiling in a way that Will had never seen before as she searched for a fitting word to describe her guest. “Charming.”

Will snorted. “You too, huh? That was fast.” A new record he was sure Hannibal would find amusing. Nigel wasn't the only Lecter brother who was disgustingly beguiling.

“Go easy on her, Will. You've had enough time to get used to him.” Margot took a sip of her water, pushing the slices of lemon around with her straw.

“I don't think that'll ever be the case,” Will said.

“How is he, with all of this?” Alana sobered quickly, sadness tingeing their otherwise happy conversation.

They agreed on what they should say. How they should play the situation. “It was a lot. Losing Nigel, meeting me, learning about why I was running and from whom—it was a lot to ask of him to understand, but he did. He does.”

“Was he there? When Mason—” Margot feared Mason, knew he had to be killed if he was to ever stop, but he was still her twin.

Will put his hand over hers. “Hannibal was taken with me, to hurt me. But Mason made deals with people more dangerous than himself and, when a fight broke out between Mason and his men and the groups he hired to find me, we escaped.”

“You're sure he's dead, Will? You *saw*?”

Mason was like a bogeyman to Margot. She would never be completely at peace without proof. Will nodded, cutting off her questions with a gentle squeeze to her hand. “He's gone, Margot. The people Mason provoked? They didn't leave much left of him.” He leaned to kiss her forehead and wiped a tear from her cheek before he stood. “I'm gonna see if Hannibal needs any help.”

Will left Alana and Margot to cuddle and process what all he hinted at on the couch, following his nose as he searched. He stopped in the doorway of the kitchen to watch. Hannibal's jacket was draped over a chair as the man stirred something at the stove. The

matching waistcoat accentuated his trim midsection. The sleeves of his pristine white shirt were rolled up to protect from any mishaps. Will admired the image of him, the strength of him, and smiled when Hannibal stopped his movements and tilted his head. Sensing. Scenting. Hannibal looked over his shoulder and smiled.

“Have you come to offer yourself as assistant?”

“Yes. If I hadn't got up to move, I think I would've nodded off on our generous hostesses.”

“I'm feeling a little desynchronized, myself. Drain the pasta for me, Will. I have the colander already in the sink. Thank you.”

Will did as he was told, plopping the noodles into the pan on the burner at Hannibal's instruction so he could toss them in sauce. He inhaled the light, creamy fragrance and sighed. Even in the heat, whatever Hannibal concocted already seemed soothing just from the smell. “What did you decide to feed Margot, Doctor?”

“Cacio e pepe, with whole wheat spaghetti and easier on the black pepper than usual. Bland enough to not aggravate Margot's sensitive stomach. Rich enough to comfort and give her a good amount of calories.”

As Will helped plate their dinner, he smiled as memories came to him. At Hannibal's curious look he said, “My dad used to make this a lot when I was a kid. It's simple and you only need a few ingredients. Sometimes, he would just toss noodles with butter and Parmesan from those green shaker canisters. One time, he used a few packets of instant ramen. He called it 'white spaghetti.'”

It wasn't often that Will reduced Hannibal to speechlessness. A man of such tastes and proclivities was hard to shock. Very rarely was he horrified. Because of this, Will relished every time he accomplished just that. Will grabbed two plates to bring to Margot and Alana, stealing a quick kiss from Hannibal's stunned lips before he left.

* * * * *

A week of resting, sun-bathing and swimming recharged them. They stayed around the house, insisting they didn't need to be shown attractions or tourist traps. It was a trip for reconnecting more than vacation. And for healing. Every day further from his final confrontation with Mason was a balm to his psyche and soul. Will knew Margot felt the same. She still looked ready to pop, but she seemed lighter. Happier than he had ever seen her before. Finally able to love whom she wanted openly, plan the future she longed for, enjoy the baby she couldn't wait to meet without fear of her family ripping everything away.

Will came into their bedroom after putting Katinka in her crib. The weather agreed with her, as well. Made her extra playful but the heat tired her quickly. She was always asleep almost instantly once in her crib since they arrived. He sat on the edge of the bed and watched as Hannibal stood by the windows, taking in the lake that looked like a painting even in the dark of night.

“They like you, both of them. Alana thinks we're strange but complimentary.”

Hannibal had yet to turn from the view. “Fulfilling what each of us is missing within ourselves.”

“Margot took to you quicker. She trusts you. You feel safe to her.”

“I have found myself growing fond of her, as well.” Will could hear the smile in his voice. “She reminds me so of Mischa. I can't imagine terrorizing my sister the way Mason did to Margot.”

“She mentioned taking you up on your offer of assisting her midwife with the delivery.”

“Margot is your friend and the mother of your child. I can't think of anything I'd rather do than help bring your son into the world. Be present for his first cries. I find myself wondering if his eyes will be the fetching adventurine of Margot's or the ever-changing blue of the sea like yours.”

Will couldn't help smiling at the idea, that Hannibal would even ponder such a thing. The thought brought an odd sort of warmth to him. Before, he kept himself from thinking of the baby, his son, too deeply. It—he—was always something fragile and delicate. The concept of him. At any moment, he could have been snatched from Margot. Will could have failed him in so many ways. Now that the most dangerous threat was dealt with, a tentative sort of joy and curiosity kept sneaking up on Will.

Was this what it was supposed to be like?

“I guess you'll know for sure for Christmas. Do you think he'll be a Christmas baby?”

Hannibal made a considering sort of noise. “I would guess after Christmas, but not before New Year's.”

He sounded so certain that Will felt confident in his estimation. He sighed and leaned back on his palms against the soft mattress. A breeze blew in from the balcony, carrying the scent of flowers. Hyacinths and hibiscuses. The humidity wasn't uncomfortable but he could feel the heat sticking to him, threatening slick skin and kicked off sheets when they slept.

“Do you mind spending Christmas here?”

“Watching you swim in crystal blue water; showing off Katinka in all of her new sundresses; drinking sangria while I read under an umbrella—it's all quite a hardship for me, Will.”

“Just wanted to make sure. I know this is a lot.”

“Quite. Especially when I could be layering myself in fur coats just to get the mail right now, if I'm not already snowed-in.”

Hannibal stopped his teasing at Will's quiet laugh. Suddenly, a sobering thought came to him and it was impossible not to voice. “It's been a long time since I've celebrated the holiday. Let alone with anyone else. With family. How strange,” he trailed off.

Hannibal finally turned to him and Will found himself once more astonished at where his life took him. No job that physically and mentally drained him. He was free from his past, from Mason. There was a little girl in his life he considered his daughter. A son on the way, shared with someone who was one of his closest friends. Family now cared how he was and valued him unconditionally.

Life put him on a path of blood and pain, converging with the shaded trail which Hannibal Lecter stalked. Brought him into the sights of such a man.

Warmth and light and every kind of pleasure to indulge in became Hannibal. The sun had made golden highlights in his dark hair. His complexion had turned a more bronzed tan. Still stark, beautiful. Misleading. The perfect cover. All those hideous things he partook of. The wicked delights he indulged. Hidden by magnetism and sophistication. Tenderness that masked menace. And he was completely besotted with Will.

“C'mere.” All Will had to do was hold out his hand, the slightest gesture, and Hannibal crossed the room to him. He smiled as Hannibal stepped into the space between his knees, awaiting any further command. He skimmed his hands up along Hannibal's shirtless figure. His skin was warm. “Everything about you has turned golden. Like you absorbed the sun.”

“I was just admiring the same about you.” Hannibal pulled him up, keeping Will close as he gripped his growing hair between his fingers. It would need to be cut soon. He wondered if Hannibal would have an opinion on his irritating curls getting the chop. Hannibal leaned in to trail his lips along his neck, inhaling as he explored. “You smell of trees and rich, black earth.” He pushed Will's flimsy button-up, thin and loose to fight the heat, from his shoulders with his free hand. “The scent and salt of the lake clings to you even now. You are what I imagine an Ežerinis to be."

A lake spirit.

Before Will could comment, he was turned. A shiver trilled through him as wispy touches and kisses fanned across fresh scar tissue. Smoother than the brand and strangely sensitive. Hannibal had done excellent work. Not that Will ever doubted the doctor's skills. It had been a surreal experience. Intimate in a way he never would have considered before. Will drifted off one afternoon under Hannibal's scalpel and woke no longer bearing Mason's foul mark. All that remained was a patch of pink skin. A perfect square between the jut of his shoulder blades.

No one else had seen it, the ugly crest nor Hannibal's precise correction. Will kept it covered, protected against the elements whenever he was outside. Only Hannibal knew about it, and all other scars he had. Every mark ever left behind. Just as Hannibal was known to Will. There was nothing left kept between them. In all ways. Skin-deep and beyond.

Arms wrapped around him and a broad chest pressed tight against his back. Strong and fierce and capable of such beautiful disaster. Will leaned to rest his head against Hannibal's shoulder. One of his hands searched tantalizingly along the edge of Will's shorts as the other caressed the jagged slash across his stomach. Will teased blunt nails along Hannibal's neck, grazing back and forth against the thin skin over his pulse. It fluttered, as if the body

recognized the danger and the heart reveled in the knowledge. A thought came into his head to settle and make a nest.

Will wondered when they would hunt again.

* * * * *

Even with Mason gone, on the word of two reliable witnesses' who told her of his alleged gang-related death, Margot refused to stay in a hospital to have her baby. Hyper-vigilant. Paranoid. Will couldn't blame her. Nor could he argue against her logic. Mason dead or not, there was no guarantee that there weren't bounty hunters who hadn't heard their contracts were expired. It wasn't a risk any of them were keen to make.

So, with Margot's funds and the expertise of two doctors and a midwife, Sofia, one of the spare rooms was turned into a delivery room. Hannibal and Alana made lists with Sofia and equipment seemingly appeared by magic for Will to carry around and move where desired. An actual hospital bed replaced the four-post California king. Cupboards and shelves were stocked with any and all supplies Margot and the baby might need. They were as ready as they could be. And late in the day on the twenty-eighth of December, all their planning was put into action.

Through his haze of anxiety, panic and excitement, it occurred to Will that Hannibal's guess was right.

One would think the room would be crowded. Too many cooks in the kitchen. Will useless and underfoot. However, Hannibal and Alana assisted Sofia flawlessly while Will tended to Margot. He stood out of their way at the head of the bed and watched as the two doctors deferred to the midwife, executing every order efficiently and swiftly. Will was in awe of everyone, but no one more than Margot. She didn't want an epidural and hardly raised her voice. Margot only hissed and groaned as her contractions grew more intense. Will held her hand and wiped her brow, praising her all the while.

A few hours later, as the sun set behind snow-capped mountains, he finally arrived.

Through blood and pain. Amidst danger before he even left the safety of his mother's body. A few clamps and a snip. His eyes and mouth were cleared. The first gasp of breath into strong lungs. His cry was a loud, wailing squall that sent the hairs at the back of Will's neck standing.

Small and red and angry. Margot could hardly wait for him to be cleaned before she reached out with impatient hands. Once he was in her arms a peace settled over her Will had never seen from her before. She had waited so long for him. Margot tore her gaze from the baby to give Will a pale, tired smile. “Caleb,” she whispered.

Will couldn't help smiling. It was nice putting a name to a face. He sated his curiosity with a few touches. Caleb's sparse strands of dark hair were so fine he barely felt them. Will stood back to let Alana take his place once she returned, cleaned and looking on the verge of happy hysteria. He left them to marvel over Caleb while he made future arrangements with Sofia and saw her out.

Hannibal found him later, walking barefoot on the shore and looking up at the bright gibbous moon. He fell into step beside him, plucking stones from their path to toss across gentle waves. Finally, he took hold of Will's wrist to stop his wandering. “What are you thinking?”

Will looked over Hannibal as he tried to put to words what he was feeling. A light breeze toyed with Hannibal's hair, sent the fine material of his shirt rippling. “I love Katinka. I love you. I love your family. I have you all, and now I have a son. I want us in Cal's life.” Just saying it out loud felt like welcoming misfortune. “Can I have both?”

He could see Hannibal's head tilt in the darkness, could feel his curiosity and amusement. “Why are you so doubtful that you can?”

Will laughed and it was a small, sad thing even to his own ears. “Things like this never work out in my life. I never get to keep hold of anything for myself. It's all so slick as hell.” He sighed and looked up at the stars. “I feel like I'm tempting Fate. I shouldn't be selfish. I get my family. I get to have you. I should be content.”

“'Content' is boring.” Hannibal smiled and stepped forward, cupping Will's jaw as he leaned closer. “If you want to have some part in Caleb's life, in Margot's, I will make that happen. Never settle. If I have to spend the rest of my life breaking you of this awful habit of settling, I will.”

“I feel greedy,” Will said as he pressed into his touch.

“I want you to be greedy.” Hannibal kissed him. A soft nuzzle of contact before he pulled back to look him over. “Whatever you want, tell me and it’s yours.”

Will breathed a laugh as he slipped his arms around him. “You're like some demon prince from a fairy tale. Making deals for my wishes in the moonlight.”

Hannibal's smile grew, glinting in the starlit night, and he pressed their foreheads together. “Shall I spin you gold?”

* * * * *

It took a week and three days for Margot to escape bed rest and only going from the delivery room to the living room. While Alana napped with Caleb. Her mission was to search until she found Will. Margot came across him as he played with Katinka outside. Katinka's squeals of delight tipped her off, audible from the house.

Will laughed at Katinka's giggles and he stooped to dip her feet in the waves once more. They had been at this for a bit. The novelty of splashing in water had yet to wear off, if it ever would. Though, she did not care for Hannibal slathering her in sunscreen one bit. Hannibal was pitiless to her squirming and sad little sniffles as he made sure to coat her ears and neck, even her scalp. Once completely covered in the goop, Hannibal kissed her before handing her over and returning to his lounger.

“Should you be out here,” Will asked as Margot sauntered over, propping Katinka on his hip.

Margot held her hands up in a playfully placating way. “I'm not lifting, bending, running or anything else Alana has warned me off of every day since my third trimester started.”

“She's not that bad.”

“She almost banned me from going upstairs last month.”

They shared a smile and Will held still as Katinka reached out to play with Margot's hand. “How are you feeling?”

Margot knew he didn't just mean the birth of Caleb and she couldn't help smiling wider. An incredulous laugh bubbled out of her. “I don't really know. I've never been happy a day in my entire life, Will. And now...I finally, for the first, have been given everything I've ever wanted. And it's not a trick or some twisted game.”

“You weren't 'given' anything. All this, you fought for it. For yourself, for Cal. For Alana.”

“I had help. Thank you. I don't know how to repay you.”

“You don't owe me anything.”

“Only everything.”

Will scoffed and they turned to stroll down the shore, toes sinking into damp sand. “Just...Let me be in your life. In Cal's life. Let him know us.”

“Of course. Whatever capacity you want to be a part of his life, it's your choice. Although, all of us living in one house might be strange, but we'll work it out. At least I know there would be room for us all.”

“I'm not asking for that,” Will laughed at the idea. “So, you'll be going back to Muskrat Farm, take over the family business?”

“Eventually. Caleb shouldn't travel for a while, but I'm not too impatient to get back anyway. There's going to be a lot to change once I get back.” There came that bewildered laugh again. “I have nothing to really fear now. I don't quite know how to be if I'm not constantly looking over my shoulder.”

“I know exactly what you mean.”

“It's kind of exhilarating, isn't it?”

“Absolutely.”

“Are you coming back?”

“I don't think so. Just to visit you. At the moment, I want to stay near the Lecters. I've never had a family before. Not like this. Never knew I wanted one so badly until I happened into this situation. We'll see. Maybe one day I'll show Bell and Hannibal America, take them back to my roots.”

Margot hugged him tight. “We have our whole lives to decide. Plan however we want.”

They played with Katinka a little longer before making their way back to the house. Hannibal was no longer basking in the sun, seat abandoned for who knew how long. Most likely he was inside, making formula and preparing lunch. Will would wipe the oily residue off Katinka, plop her in her playpen with her plushie friends, before helping Hannibal in the kitchen however he needed. Later, he might be able to lure Hannibal out to the dock or a boat. Teach the hunter how to better fish.

Only a promising future and endless possibility lay ahead, and Will was no longer afraid of moving forward.

Chapter End Notes

A few things: First, this isn't a holiday kind of story. Christmas and New Year's just happened to fall within the timeline I started with. I started writing this story in March, so I'm a little past feeling those vibes. :) I didn't go into detail about how they spent those individual days because that wasn't my focus. There was a lot more I wanted to get to. Like, finally putting Margot in! And a surprise of Alana. And we finally see Caleb, actual baby and not just a concept. :D

Second, I didn't want the baby to be Morgan. That's Alana's son, who might eventually come into this timeline. You never know. I always thought it was terribly sad that Margot's first son was taken from her the way he was. That Will might never have learned about his son's fate. Though, that might explain one of the reasons he was so cold to Alana and Margot in Season 3? Also, "Caleb" possibly originates from Hebrew that means "dog." I couldn't resist. ;)

Third, I know some readers were worried over Hannibal's reaction to both Margot and Caleb. I can finally say there's no need for worry. I am one of the fans of the show who never thought Hannibal held any ill intentions for Margot or her baby. He despised Mason but tried to get him to accept the baby as his heir during their therapy sessions, to stop hurting Margot because she was his family. In Season 3, I was a little bummed out that Margot seemed to no longer trust him but I blame Alana's influence more than anything. To me, Hannibal was always on Margot's side. And also thought a child would be good for Will since he "lost" Abigail. Also, there's no need to fear Hannibal would hurt them because that is not the kind of story this is. :D Hannibal is Hannibal, even in this romance, but he would never hurt Margot, a baby or Will because that would hurt the one person he loves the most.

Hope everyone who popped by enjoyed this chapter. See you next week for the finale!

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Notes

The final act is upon us. The world can be such an ugly place, with so much I have no control over. I just wanted to end this on a beautiful note. To me, anyway. Pure romance stories are not my normal stomping grounds. I tried my best to capture what I love about Hannibal mixed with the romantic humor of a story like Mrs. Winterbourne. Strange I know, but I'm glad this is what came to me, begged to be written, in my time of quarantine and witnessing of such strange and scary and heart-aching times. I hope you all enjoy the last chapter. I hope it makes you even a little bit happy. Thank you so much to Jor_ishere, EmilyElm, ellethom, Ruthless330, ns100, Welcome2the_Goondocks and AGlassRoseNeverFades for leaving me such lovely comments last chapter. And thank you to everyone who stopped by for the tale. I loved and appreciated hearing from everyone who gave this story a chance. I hope you all had fun reading this because I had a blast writing it.

Please enjoy, dear readers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Act Four:

The Catch

Chapter Fifteen

Margot released herself back into the wild of American high society in as dramatic a way as possible. Still abroad, she called a contact Will had given her before they once more parted ways. Jack Crawford could be a hard bastard, but he was fair and one of the most honorable men Will knew. She would be in good hands.

She told Jack Crawford everything. Almost.

The missing heiress was not in fact dead, murdered by her unhinged lover from the FBI, but hiding from her own flesh and blood. Her brother was a dangerous, sick man and the real reason Will Graham helped her disappear. Margot feared for her life, and that of her unborn son, fleeing from Mason's deadly control. Now that her baby was born, she wanted to make contact. Obtain proper protection from reliable authorities. She handed over evidence to support her claims, including the still active website that featured a profile on her, with a price of six million American dollars for her return to Mason. Preferably alive but he would accept her body just the same, if not at a reduced sum.

Jack gave her his word that she and her family were safe now. A warrant was put out for Mason. After chewing Will out for not coming to him—to any of his former colleagues—he let

him know in the gruff way he had that he was happy to hear Will was all right. Jack cleared the charges hanging over his head. But not until after he tried to convince Will to return to the FBI, to the BSU specifically, and work under him as a criminal profiler.

Will declined the rather generous offer, barely keeping his laughter in-check at the look of murderous calculation Hannibal gave the voice on the phone.

With her safety assured, Margot then began a full-scale attack on her remaining family. It was harder to keep in the shadows with a spotlight shining on their terrible secrets. Margot was the head of the Verger family now, and she mercilessly displayed Mason's, and her late parents', private carnage for all the world to see. She refused to raise Caleb in any way as she had.

The promise of an intriguing tell-all book was hinted at in the papers, last Will thought to check.

And then a month after the scandalous debut, reporters and authorities alike clamored to get a word from Margot as there was finally activity from Mason. Over the time of monitoring his website, agents noted the amount of emails and calls. Bounty hunters from all over the globe demanded confirmation of possible payment. Inquiries into whether or not the job was still open. With every unanswered query interest dwindled. The site remained un-updated until one day there appeared to be a new post from Mason's personal account. Locked afterwards. The agents in charge of keeping an eye on the site were unable to close it down. When they did, it was already too late. The word was spread. Untraceable and final.

The headline read: ***Bounty Answered*** *with a small paragraph that informed any passing by that the contract was completed. Mason Verger would no longer be making any further requests as he was otherwise indisposed.*

A picture had been uploaded with the entry. Mason Verger. It was important that his face was left intact. For authenticity, and for the simple fact that whoever was responsible wanted him to be recognized. Recognized and understood. Suspended on ropes, sectioned and quartered like livestock. His hands were missing. As was his offensive tongue. He looked to be castrated as well. No longer would he be free to touch, to harm. A pile of bloody money lay at his swaying feet. For all of Mason's riches and power, it could never have protected him from the monster who did this.

Margot was investigated. Will was too. Nothing was found. Margot would not disclose her location to anyone but Jack and he was quick to clear her of any suspicion. Will's alibi was just as tight, as he had been vacationing in Majorca with the respected Dr. Lecter and their child at the estimated time of the murder.

Alana was horrified but ultimately none the wiser. Margot saw the photo and she knew. People like her and Will had seen too many terrible things for her to be shocked or frightened. There was always a chance she would figure it out. Will could only hope she understood. He would do anything for their safety, for Caleb's. All he ever heard on the matter was on another gorgeous day at their ocean-side rental. A gift basket was delivered to their door. Beautiful flowers that Hannibal admired. Accompanied by a soft stuffed piggy for Katinka.

A simple, embossed card nestled in the bouquet of wild roses, hydrangeas and oak-leaf geraniums. Will smiled at the note. All it said was, “Thank you.”

* * * * *

The harshest part of winter passed. The season was filled with good food, hot sun and exploring islands. A sleepy baby became a world traveler to the delight and awe of her fathers, who watched her grow and flourish. Time to dedicate to learning each other, finding out more little quirks each had and never shared before. On one memorable night there had been a fishing expedition that turned into a naked swim through moonlit waters.

But it was time to return to Lithuania.

They made ready Castle Lecter and called their family home. Mischa was the first to arrive as she had never left the country. It took Robertus and Murasaki a few days to make arrangements but they were happy to come back. They were expecting an intimate dinner to celebrate Hannibal and Will's engagement. However, there was another reason for the impromptu reunion.

Will decided it was time to tell the Lecters the truth. As much as he could spare. He had Hannibal's full support. They would do it together. Which is how Will found himself lounging in the parlor before dinner. A glass of whiskey in his hand and Hannibal sitting close beside him. He looked over the other people in the room. Almost everyone he ever cared about was sitting just a few feet from him. Would they ever treat him the same after this?

He sipped his drink before putting it aside. “There's something that I want to tell everyone. I don't really know how to say this. You all have given me so much since the day we met, and I'm asking something of you once again: please just let me explain myself completely before you say anything.”

“Whatever it is, you can tell us, Gabriel,” Murasaki said when everyone else only looked on with concern.

Will sighed and took a moment of comfort from Hannibal's presence. “I'm not Gabriel. In fact, before I woke up in the hospital, Gabriel Lecter didn't exist. I'm not Nigel's husband, nor have I ever been married. Nigel's wife's name was Gabriela, and is Katinka's mother. I have no ties to Katinka, other than I love her as if she were my own. My name is Will Graham. I was an agent for the FBI before I fled the United States. I had been living in Romania for the past six and a half months under an alias. I was unofficially in hiding from a man I had been investigating. I was told by his sister, whom I was helping stay in hiding as well, that we had been found. I left Bucharest by train, hoping to get lost in Lithuania. It was the same train Nigel and Gabi were on.

“We were friends. But they both knew me as ‘Aiden.’ The man looking for me, Mason Verger, paid for my capture, alive or dead. Bounty hunters found me, caught up to me just a few hours into Lithuania and sabotaged the train. I'm still looking into who was responsible and have come across some new leads to check. This is why Nigel's remains haven't come

home yet. Mason paid to slow the investigation, postpone and delay any progress while he looked for us. But now that he's gone, so should all the red tape as well.

“I wanted to tell you all. From the moment I came here. But I was afraid. If I revealed who I am, and it became common knowledge, Mason would have harmed you—regardless of whether or not I left you. That's just the kind of person he was. I had nowhere else to go. And then the longer I stayed, the harder it was to leave. I came to care for all of you. I didn't want to hurt you any further than I already had. I'm sorry. Hannibal only found out everything just recently. I'm sorry I had him keep up my lies.”

To Will's shock there were no outraged demands for him to leave. There were no mad grabs for phones to call the authorities. Mischa and Murasaki looked from Will to Hannibal, calm and collected as ever, before looking to Robertus.

Robertus simply settled deeper into his chair, crossed one leg over the other with his hands clasped in his lap. He spared Will a gentle smile. The kind given to unruly, scared, children who only needed a gently guiding hand to correct their wayward path. “I did not think a big reveal was necessary, but if unloading your conscience helps you with yet another monumental transition in such a short span of time, I find I, yet again, cannot deny you, Will.”

Will looked the Lecters over one by one before focusing once again on Robertus. “You've known. For some time.”

“Yes.” Robertus didn't mince words. “Though, we didn't know everything. You just filled in some blanks I was curious about. Thank you.”

“Hannibal told you.”

“*I* told you, dear boy. Remember? Hannibal had his doubts from the moment he found you sleeping away in the hospital. I gave him my blessing to satisfy his curiosity, to soothe his anger and heartache. No matter where his search led. Just a few months ago, Hannibal told me he knew without a doubt that you are not Gabriel and you did not harm his brother. As head of the family, I left it up to Hannibal to do what he would with the information he found. Though, I am happy he spared your life. I am rather fond of you. We all are.” Murasaki and Mischa murmured their agreement.

Will tried to order his thoughts to something that resembled sense. The Lecters all had a terrible habit of jumbling up his mind. Robertus watched, patient and smiling as Will tried and failed a few times to speak. He had so many things he wanted to say. So many questions he burned to ask. “Why make Gabriel a Lecter? If you knew I was lying to you from the beginning, why make me a part of your family? Why give me such vast access to your accounts?”

“I was curious to see what would happen.” He looked Will over and a fierce sort of affection came into his gaze. “You are thinking what I said to you that day was a lie. Stop. I could not predict that Hannibal's affections for you would evolve into what they did. Though, I was not entirely surprised either. Even if Hannibal had not drawn you into our family further with his

rather audacious courting, I would have wanted you bound to us in some way. I do consider you family, Will."

"You don't know me. You know a version of me that was never real."

"You showed us a version of truth, as best you could in the situation you found yourself. And there are so many more parts of yourself you cannot completely conceal. Not from us." Robertus chuckled and leaned forward in his chair, searching out Will's gaze until he could not help but to hold it. "You ask how I could entrust my family, our legacy, so easily unto you and there is the answer. I see you, and I know you for who are, Will. From the moment you came limping into my home. Used to clawing your way through life. Used to surviving. You are not some worthless bore dazzled by wealth and luxury. You would rather be penniless than dependent on comforts handed to you. That had a strange effect on me. You hardly ask for anything, it makes me want to give you everything." Robertus turned to Hannibal, a firm if affectionate light in his eyes. "You are truly in love? This is not just one of your games you do so enjoy playing? You still plan to marry Will?"

"Yes." Hannibal looked over Will's frame, a soft smile teasing at his lips. "I allowed myself to fully commit to the love I feel for him after I found out the truth. It was never Gabriel Lecter who captured my attention, but Will Graham."

Robertus studied Hannibal, amazed at his earnest declaration. "How extraordinary." Will stood when Robertus did. He gave Will's cheek a soft pat. "Nothing has changed, except for your name. And I find comfort in the thought that you were with our Nigel when he died. If he could not fade away in the arms of his love, then the arms of his friend are a good second best." A squeeze to Will's shoulder before Robertus stepped away. He left the room, the conversation finished as far he was concerned.

Mischa came to him, reaching for his hands as she kissed his cheek. "Don't be cross with us."

"I couldn't if I wanted to." He brought her into a hug and smiled as she tucked herself closer. "You kept secrets from me no more than I kept from you. And I'm sure Hannibal told you not to tell me." He shared a look with Hannibal over Mischa's blonde head.

"I wish you hadn't felt the need to hide."

"I was trying to protect you."

"I know. I understand, but I hated it. Though, I hated the thought of you leaving more. I am happy you stayed."

"Me too."

She pulled away to skim the back of her hand across his smooth cheek. "No more secrets, Will. Amongst any of us." On her way out she received the reverential kiss Hannibal placed on her forehead with a smile.

Murasaki came to stand before Will but she made no move to touch him. She smiled in that serene way she had that made Will feel like he was submerged in calm waters. "I understand

your necessity for deceit. The circumstances of when and how we first met—it was the most practical course you could have taken. But that chapter of your life has reached a conclusion. There is only moving forward, and I ask you to never hide from us again."

"I promise, Lady Murasaki." Will couldn't help lowering his head in apology. Between her and Robertus, he felt like a thoroughly chastised toddler.

Murasaki took him gently by the chin to meet her eyes. "I care deeply for Hannibal. I see how happy Katinka makes him. How happy you make him. I would never try to separate you from him. Without a very good reason," she added.

Will watched as Murasaki kissed Hannibal's cheek, laying a delicate hand over his heart. They had a soft exchange in Japanese before she left them to see to Katinka. She assured them they would see each other at dinner. The door closed and they were alone. Silence except for the sound of Will's breathing. It sounded heavy and bordering frantic to his ears. Hannibal noticed, along with the tremors that wracked his body, and came closer. He was about to ask after him, worry darkening his features, when Will pulled him into his arms and muffled a laugh against his shoulder.

"I feel like I just passed some kind of test."

Hannibal cradled his jaw in his hands, looking over him with a breathless smile. "You did. A potentially dangerous one. Congratulations."

Will brought him into a kiss before hugging him. His shaking subsided in the tight embrace but his heart still raced. He had never been so relieved, so happy. Something else made his heart trip. A tingling warmth spread through his veins alongside the rush of blood. That strange, addictive sense of epiphany. "They know, don't they? About your appetites."

"Yes, and they join me willingly at the table." Hannibal laid his head against Will's temple and sighed in contentment when Will ran a hand along his back. "Accepted long ago. Robertus knew the moment he laid eyes on me, all those years ago. When he came to collect the only things he had left of his brother. When he took three haunted, but only slightly malnourished, children from their crumbling home."

"Your family."

Hannibal kissed Will's curls, lips trailing inevitably to the fine scar on his forehead. "*Our* family."

* * * * *

With the death of Mason Verger, cash flows to certain politicians, doctors and police officers dried up. Suddenly, what was taking months to even find information on was moving steadily to completion overnight by the same names that previously impeded progress. Names of said politicians, doctors and police officers whom Will and Hannibal marked and would remember. News channels, websites and papers all were finally able to confirm the train accident that claimed more than half the people on board was not, after all, accidental.

Will kept his name out of everything, and Mason's. There was enough to prove there was tampering with the tracks without having to identify any one individual to know it was a deliberate act. Many speculated it was caused by a terrorist group. No one could say who or what their motivations were. Most families affected by the tragedy didn't care at the moment. They only wanted their loved ones returned. Will knew once the shock and grief wore off that would change. There would be calls for retribution. For blood. They would never know their demands for vengeance were already answered.

The Lecters had their time of anger. Now it was time for mourning.

The investigations finally wrapped up. Names were all placed with faces. As many as were able. Some were never found. Aiden Teague was among the forever missing. The American emigrant teacher living a quiet life in Bucharest. No one looked for him long in Romania. No one in the states came forward to claim him.

It was spring when Nigel came home.

Will insisted Gabriela be brought to the estate with Nigel. Gabi had no living relatives to speak up for her and Will couldn't bear the thought of leaving her behind in Romania while her daughter lived so far away. Gabriela Ibanescu. She chose not to take Nigel's last name. Another mystery that would forever tease at the back of Will's mind. One among many he promised to solve. For Katinka. A time would come when he and Hannibal would venture to Romania, tie up the loose ends Nigel left behind and piece together more of his and Gabi's life. For now, all anyone wanted to focus on was putting the couple to rest.

They took advantage of the weather. A reprieve from spring storms. There was still a chill but no harsh winds blew or sheets of rain poured down as the Lecters traveled to the cemetery tucked away on their property. The smell of freshly tilled earth was heavy on the air. Mixed with the scent of the large bundles of chrysanthemums, roses and lilies. It made for a hauntingly lovely tableau.

Two new headstones side by side. Watching over two new graves.

The family said their farewells, softly spoken prayers for the lost son and his wife. They left to continue the ceremony at the castle. Only Will remained with Hannibal standing ready for whatever way he was needed. He watched as Will knelt between the markers, polished quartzite that glittered in the afternoon sun. Will set Katinka in the grass, mittens and little coat over her dark purple dress. She watched herself in the reflection of the stones and Will smiled as she tried to crawl closer.

“It's only been a handful of months and she's already grown so much since the last time you saw her.” Will placed a white rose atop Gabi's stone. “We'll bring Katinka up here often, tell her what we can of you. We won't let her forget you. I'm sorry. I wish I could reverse time. Never board that train. I wish I had been given more time to know you. Maybe in the next life.” He sighed and was startled to find himself swallowing down a sob. It wasn’t just because he felt every member of the Lecter family’s pain that he found himself choking down his emotions. The guilt he felt for his part in their deaths would never go away. It was still a raw, aching wound and he scrubbed the tears off his cheeks. Katinka turned to look at him, squealing with delight at finding him and lifted her hands out to him. He scooped her up and

kissed her head. “I hope what happened to Mason and his men pleases you. Wherever you are, I hope you both are comfortable. At peace.” He came to lay his hand against cold stone. “Thank you, Gabi, for letting me borrow your life.”

Hannibal joined him, slipping his arms around both Will and Katinka. He looked to Nigel's grave and then Gabi's. “We shall honor yours for the rest of ours.” He kissed away the last of Will's tears as he took Katinka. They walked back to Castle Lecter in a comfortable silence. Memories of the dearly departed followed along.

* * * * *

A few weeks went by after their final farewell to Nigel and Gabi and they had yet to return to the city. Will didn't mind too much. He had a feeling Hannibal could tell he found comfort in the quiet and seclusion of Castle Lecter. After all the excitement of the last several months. Traveling abroad. Enjoying the sights and sounds of bustling city life. It was nice to not have to constantly shield himself from the emotions of so many people.

Although now it was almost too quiet.

Will let Mira in after she played for a few hours in the cool evening. He made sure there was no mud caked on her paws or burs in her fur before leading her to her room. It was still too much of a climb up the stairs for her by herself. And, sadly, Will found she was getting too large to safely carry to his room. Robertus was happy to allow their little guardian a home for herself in one of the rooms off from the laundry room that once might have been a larder. Will gave her a few more scratches and got her to settle before he left her for the night.

He wandered the ground floor, at a loss for what to do with himself. Everyone was gone. Mischa left the day before. Spending a week in Paris with friends. Robertus and Murasaki decided to stay a few days at their lake house in Aukstaitija. They begged to take the baby with them. Will gave in easily with a smile even as his insides quaked at the thought. He hadn't been apart from Katinka for so long since they left the hospital together.

He felt her absence like a severed limb.

Any further wool-gathering abruptly stopped when an arm snaked around his waist and lips found his temple. “I can feel your lachrymose thoughts from the other end of the house.”

Will smiled and looked to Hannibal. “Sorry. I miss her. Don't you?”

“Yes, but I also see the importance of Katinka bonding with the rest of her family. We can't be with her all the time.”

“I know.” That didn't mean he had to like it. He also knew it was crazy to hoard her to himself.

“Come. I have just the thing to take your mind off your pining.”

“I'm not pining. You're pining.” Will followed anyway.

He really shouldn't have been surprised that Hannibal led him to the kitchen. Hannibal went to the hook near one of the antique curios to grab his apron. His suit jacket was already safely draped over a chair and sleeves rolled up for work. Everything was laid out on the gleaming counter. A rainbow of ingredients. Red tomatoes. Orange peppers. Purple onions. Green scallions and bundles of fresh cilantro. Pale strips of potato that set soaking in water. Small bowls ready and waiting with the liquids needed for whatever recipe was concocted. Will watched as Hannibal fetched a cut of meat from the fridge that had been marinating in something he was sure would make the piece that much more succulent.

When Hannibal poured two glasses of a red wine Will came to stand beside him. He took the glass offered, savoring the drink as he looked once more at the spread. “What are you making for dinner tonight?”

“Lomo saltado, and we're making it together.”

Will enjoyed one last sip of wine before taking up the sharpened knife Hannibal passed him. He set to work at whatever task was given to him with the ease of a practiced assistant now. Hannibal often insisted on his aid in the kitchen and Will found he didn't mind. It was therapeutic in a way. Calming. The rhythm one could fall into when preparing and cooking. The catharsis of completing all the work and experiencing, enjoying, the finished creation.

As Hannibal seeded and sliced tomatoes and peppers, Will minced garlic and ginger. He found himself smiling as he moved the blade in learned strokes. A quick study who pleased his mentor. Warmth bloomed in his chest at the ease they worked around each other, at the idea of this routine being a part of his life for the remainder of his days. Of course, doubt crept into his mind to spoil such dreams.

“I might be more trouble than I'm worth.”

Hannibal paused in slicing red onions to take a drink and glanced at Will's growing mound of pungent spices. “Your technique isn't that bad.”

Will scoffed and kept mincing as he continued his point, “I mean: this life we want, the one you want me to be a part of. You're risking a lot to keep me around. I might not be worth it.”

“Why do you think that?” Hannibal's voice was calm, insouciant, as he swiped the produce into separate bowls and started on the scallions.

“The people who found me—someone will try to find them. Their last steps on earth will lead right to our door, if a clever person bothers to follow them.” Hannibal's little hum was so blasé that Will couldn't help chuckling, mood beginning to lift once more.

“I doubt that. You know there are not too many people in this world that are even half as clever as you. And none of those people will come calling, I promise.”

“So sure of yourself. You're lucky I find your confident arrogance so adorable.”

“I count it among my many blessings every morning, Will.” He started to give the leafy cilantro a nice, rough chop. “If I had one wish, it would be for you to realize there is nothing

to fear anymore. Not now that you have me. Charlie had no family left. He quit his job, abandoned his entire life, for his beloved Gabi. No one who might remember him will know where to look for him. Gabi bought his plane ticket to Lithuania. He left no trail to pick up the scent. Miss Lounds was very naughty before she disappeared. She was delving into the illegal, making deals she should not have. Didn't leave behind any emergency contacts or contingency plans if she met a foul end. No clues for even friends and family to follow."

Will brought over his contribution which Hannibal accepted with a smile. Another niggling thought resurfaced to tease at his curiosity. "That night, at the motel. Do you remember what you said in reference to my concerns?"

"Yes. I reminded you of the fact that I have experience in using every bit of the animals I slaughter."

Will watched as Hannibal took up the dish of meat and placed it on his cutting board. His way with a blade was always precise. Always exactly the thickness he desired. Even against the grain, the meat separated tantalizingly until Hannibal had a bowl of strips he brought to a well-seasoned cast iron wok on the stove. While he fried the meat, Will started the rice to steam. He watched the meat brown, tender morsels searing under Hannibal's attentive gaze.

The developing fragrance of their meal made Will's mouth water and he couldn't help voicing his thoughts. "You're not using beef in your lomo saltado?"

Hannibal was pleased by his observation, the growing strength of his palate and olfactory senses. "Traditionally, one would. However, I like to experiment. Substitute when and where I can to discover the best balance of flavor. Don't worry though, tonight is special. I used only the best cuts for this. For you."

Will stole a piece from the cooling dish as Hannibal fried the rest of the vegetables before combining everything with the sauce. He considered as he chewed. Even without much seasoning, it was incredible. Lush, with the right amount of crispness to the edges. "It's not veal."

"Pork."

"No." He laughed at the look he was given. "There's no way that's pork. It's too...decadent," Will decided on.

"It is," Hannibal insisted as he took the wok from the fire before stepping close to Will. He pulled him in for a kiss, lips tasting of rich Cabernet Sauvignon. "She was a slim and delicate pig," he said against Will's mouth.

Dainty. Slight. Ringlets of startlingly red hair. Big blue eyes, sharp and quick, that never saw Hannibal coming. Will shivered in Hannibal's hold. "Is dinner ready?"

"Very nearly. If you wash up now, you should be back by the time I've set the table."

Will slipped from his hold and admired the figure he cut. Minutes spent over a hot flame and not a hair out of place. His shirt was the same dark color as the wine he poured them and his

fitted black waistcoat matched his jacket. Will leaned against the counter to finish off his first glass of the evening, hand sliding into the pocket of his snug jeans. “I feel under-dressed. Should I change for this special occasion you've obviously spent time plotting?”

“Not at all. Your place at the table is only always just as you are.”

When the time for feasting came, it was just the two of them. Candles illuminated the spread they made. A small fire crackled in the hearth to chase away the evening chill. Pleasant, hushed conversation. Teasing touches between passes of serving dishes and wine. Heated glances over a bright and fragrant arrangement of peonies, stephanotis and anthurium.

It was everything either man had ever wanted.

* * * * *

“No, come back,” Will complained into his pillow when he felt the warmth and pressure from Hannibal's body leave his back. A kiss was placed in apology against his sweaty shoulder blade.

“I won't be long. I have to retrieve something from the dresser.”

“You don’t have to. Whatever it is can wait ‘til tomorrow.”

“It cannot. Not a moment longer.”

A series of biting kisses trailed down his spine and Will sighed, giving in and sinking further into the soft bedding beneath him.

There had been no dessert. No digestivo shared in the sitting room after their meal by firelight. It was the first time Will didn't have to coax Hannibal away from clearing the dishes right after dinner. He followed willingly, eagerly. Their world shrank down to just them. Nothing existed but the feel and taste of each other. The sounds of their enjoyment in one another. For now, alone in the little space they created. Made for the other in mind.

Nothing else mattered.

Will rolled onto his back, enjoying the exquisite soreness throughout his body. Tender aches and soft pains. He admired the marks he left on Hannibal as he searched for whatever it was that stole his attention. Bruises, dark and lovely, on his chest. A path of claw marks on his neck and shoulders. Bites nipped onto his hips and thighs. All encouraged and beautifully requested from flushed lips. Pleas that Will would never ignore. He scooched along the silk sheets until his back rested against the headboard when Hannibal returned. Instead of sliding into bed beside him, he sat astride Will's outstretched legs.

“A gift for you.” Hannibal presented Will a small lacquer box.

A strange, thrilling chill tickled over Will's body as he looked at the lovely trinket. A blend of golds and reds and blacks. The edges bore a design of interlocking tree branches. In the center stood a stag. Will traced the majestic beast's outline with a reverent touch of fingertips. He smiled at the odds of it all. This place, this person, was always meant to be his ending.

His beginning. He opened the lid and laughed, delighted. Nestled safely in red silk were two rings.

“I'm surprised you're letting me have this. We haven't even had the announcement party. There's no one around to dazzle with twelve-course menus and intricate centerpieces.”

“I'm not marrying them, I'm marrying you. There will be a time for that later. A time to please our family with the pomp and spectacle of an elaborate wedding. Now is the time for just us.” Hannibal watched him as he picked up the smaller of the pair and held it up for examination. “Do you like them?”

Dark, warm gold. A pattern etched into the metal that reminded Will of antlers. Upon closer inspection, he found words engraved inside the band. *One heart One soul Eternally*

“They're beautiful. Have you tried yours on yet?”

“No. I wanted to wait to try them together.” Hannibal took the ring from him and put it on Will’s left hand. Will did the same for him. They admired the look of the rings, on themselves and each other. A perfect fit. He leaned closer, cupping Will's cheek. “I feel like I have known you my whole life. Before this life. How long I have spent looking for you, Will.”

Will placed his hand over Hannibal's, turning it to kiss his palm. “You're the only one who has ever understood me, Hannibal. Wholly understood and accepted.” He took a stabilizing breath, no longer afraid to speak his most protected secret aloud. “I think I've loved you since I first saw you. I knew you from first glance.” The hunter in the dark beside him.

“I would know you anywhere.”

Will's laugh was soft and wet with unshed tears, shattered by their ever-strengthening connection. “We're conjoined. I don't think I could survive separation.”

Hannibal kissed him, tangling his hand in Will's hair as he moved his lips to the scar on his forehead. “That will never happen,” he promised.

Will smiled and pulled him closer, searching for another kiss. Something broke free inside him at Hannibal's words. Nothing, aside from an act of a jealous god, would ever keep them apart. Perhaps not even then. If there was one thing that Will had learned it was that Hannibal was tenacious when it came to the things he held dear. And Hannibal had yet to break a promise.

The end

Chapter End Notes

A final note:

First, I hope the readers who were curious over the details of Mason's end are satisfied with the last peak into what all Will and Hannibal designed for him. I was trying something a little different with this story, peppering details over a span of chapters instead of one big release of information. I hope it wasn't confusing or frustrating.

Second, I didn't recycle the big reveal from earlier chapters when Hannibal informed Will that he knew all along for the Lecters as well. The ending is quite different than the movie when it comes to this part, but I have my reasons. I've been planning this kind of ending since the beginning of drafting this story for one main big reason. In the show, in Season 1, a lot of people always get caught on the "folie à deux" exchange between Alana and Abigail. What interested me more was Hannibal's line immediately after. He told Abigail, “One cannot be delusional if the belief in question is accepted as ordinary by others in that person's culture or sub-culture. Or family.” It got me thinking a lot about Hannibal's own family. I just really like to think about all the ways that this could have been the case for him, if fate and circumstance hadn't sent him on the path they did. I hope everyone loves the Murder Family as much as I do. :)

Third, I never planned on writing the actual wedding scene in this story. Another divergence from the movie. I might write something later. In fact, I have ideas from Hannibal's POV and perhaps even AU ideas of this AU. I know, it's getting out of hand. :D However, if anyone is interested in me exploring this story line further, let me know.

Fourth, this is hands down the gooiest thing I've ever written. Original or fan fiction. I'm still not sure if I'm proud of that fact or horrified. :D But like I said up top, I began this and ended this in one of the darkest moments I can remember. I want to leave something right now that, while dark, I think is sweet and beautiful and full of fluffy love. It's all I can offer to anyone who needs to escape the real world. I hope I helped. Thank you so much for stopping by. Please stay safe, sane, healthy and happy, dear readers!

Till next time,
CReed

P.S. You're absolutely welcome to visit me on my tumblr!

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